

2'6

SCIENCE FANTASY

HARRY HARRISON, T. B. SWANN,
JOHN RACKHAM, KEITH ROBERTS



SCIENCE FANTASY

Edited by Kyril Bonfiglioli

.....

Contents

EDITORIAL	2
THE BLUE MONKEYS <i>by Thomas Burnett Swann</i>	4
ROOM WITH A SKEW <i>by John Rackham</i>	49
E. J. CARNELL—A QUICK LOOK <i>by Harry Harrison</i>	61
THE CHARM <i>by Keith Roberts</i>	64
NOT ME, NOT AMOS CABOT! <i>by Harry Harrison</i>	80
THE MADMAN <i>by Alistair Bevan</i>	89
JOIK <i>by Ernest Hill</i>	104
ONE OF THOSE DAYS <i>by Charles Platt</i>	123

.....

Published every other month by ROBERTS & VINTER LTD.,
44 Milkwood Rd., London, S.E.24. Subscriptions 17/-
(\$3.00) post free per year.

All communications (sender's risk) to The Editor, SF,
18 Norham Gardens, Oxford. All terrestrial characters and
places are fictitious.

© 1964 by SCIENCE FANTASY.

EDITORIAL

THERE really seems little point in writing an editorial this time about anything but the most important science-fiction event for a long time—the publication of Brian Aldiss' new novel GREYBEARD (Faber 18s.).

There is no doubt about this being Aldiss' best work yet: the difficulty lies in trying to decide whether to invite attack by saying that I think it is the best science-fiction novel anyone has ever written. Perhaps the best plan is to compromise and say that I am sure it is in the best six. Those enthusiasts who may have, from time to time, been puzzled by his tentative steps in new directions; those who have felt, perhaps, that he may have been written out; those particularly who, like myself, have been frustrated by a kind of wilful perfunctoriness about his novels—all these must now sit back and say that they were wrong, for this novel is rounded, complete, mature and beautifully coherent. This may indeed be the novel we have all been hoping someone would write: the novel which is to emancipate science-fiction and clear it of the reproach of infantility.

Briefly, this is a novel of the near future, when experiments with The Bomb have irradiated most of the animal kingdom in such fashion that reproduction in most species has stopped. Including man. The world depicted is one of elderly people, few of whom are even trying to master the vices of the old. The ecology of the whole countryside has gone mad and is dominated by packs of stoats. Throughout the story we are kept close to nature and particularly to the life of the Thames, which winds through the action with leisurely symbolism, linking together the rather complex time-scheme, pregnant with its own unchanging vitality. Human life is cheap, old bones are brittle, old folk are homicidally selfish.

The characters, for the first time in an Aldiss novel, are satisfyingly painted in rich, deep tones and one feels one would recognise them in the street. They are inconsistent, unpredictable, not particularly likeable—rather like people you meet in the street. Humanity's reaction to this scissoring-off of its posterity is conceived with tremendous

verve, daring and insight. Slowly during the development of the story the aching question becomes ascendant: will children ever be born again? There is an answer at the end.

Perhaps the most enjoyable part of the book is the series of wonderfully-illuminated vignettes: a military dictator and his tame professors, a fair by night straight from Van Ostade, stoats swimming the river, a quack-healer's booth, an Oxford College turned into a fortified caravanserai—dozens of others painted with leisure and love by this new Aldiss. This is definitely one you have to buy—despite what is probably the least attractive dust-wrapper I have seen for years.

Which reminds me to deplore the practice of marking books like this with the apologetic words "A Science Fiction Novel." Those who read science-fiction will buy it anyway on the strength of the author's name; the unconverted will have visions of rocket-ships and bug-eyed monsters and will shy away. Writers of Aldiss' calibre will never reach the audience they deserve while their books are labelled "Careful!—this is science fiction." The tragedy is that, dissatisfied with being second-class citizens of literature, they will be tempted to leave the field altogether and write something 'respectable' like travel-books or West End plays.

May I thank all those friendly readers who continue to write and give me their frank comments about the magazine? I am astonished that so few of them show any serious dissatisfaction with my efforts and am, as always, extremely grateful for all their suggestions and comments. If, as I hope, we are able to have a few more pages soon—there is even a good chance that we may become a monthly—I shall certainly start the letter page that so many of you are asking for. We are also soon to have line-illustrations in the text and a fairly regular science-fact feature.

Kyril Bonfiglioli

THE BLUE MONKEYS

by Thomas Burnett Swann

PART TWO

The previous chapters told how Thea and Icarus were the strange adolescent children of Aeacus, brother to the King of ancient Knossos. He had brought them back after three years' wanderings in the country of the Beasts: their ears are delicately pointed, their hair holds tints of green. Escaping from their villa, when the Achaeans over-run the coast, by means of a primitive glider, Thea escapes rape at the hands of Ajax, the pirate-chief of the Achaeans, by an unmaidenly ruse and the children are turned loose in the Minotaur's cave to be eaten alive. Eunostos the Minotaur, however, proves to be a gentle and sensitive Beast with no taste for raw meat. He takes Thea and Icarus to his tree-root fortress-home in the Forest, where Thea immediately starts to "civilise" his clothes, household and behaviour. Eunostos himself has taken up the tale:

She never said to me, "Eunostos, you ought to comb your hair or get a new pair of sandals." It was always, "Perhaps you should . . ." or "Don't you think . . ." Sometimes she worked through her brother. Two weeks after their arrival he told me in confidence, "Thea hasn't complained, but I think she misses Cretan plumbing."

"But she has a hot shower," I protested. "Or else I bring her a tub. What more does she want?"

"What she wants is a water-closet," he confided. It is universally acknowledged that the Cretans are the best plumbers in all the lands of the Great Green Sea. Not only do they pipe water into their palaces, but they build limestone toilets with wooden seats and, wonder of won-

ders, a lever for flushing. Like my ancestors, I am something of an engineer, and I lost no time in diverting a part of the spring from the garden. With her usual delicacy, Thea did not refer to my innovation, but she showed her gratitude by making me a pair of leather sandals which pinched my hooves like chains on a mule. At least in the house, I had to wear them or hurt her feelings.

Once out of the house however, I kicked them under a tree and happily pursued my business in the forest; now that my cave no longer received a weekly sacrifice—the local farmers, it seemed, were feeding the conquerors instead of the Minotaur—I hunted daily to keep my guests in meat. But one such hunt landed me in a much more serious predicament than the mere discomfort of sandals. I had bagged a wild pig with my first arrow and started back to the house with the carcass strapped across my shoulder.

“Ho there,” a voice boomed from the trees, and Moschus, the Centaur, cantered up beside me with thumping hooves and a swirl of dust. A robust fellow, Moschus, in spite of his years. His flanks glistened with olive oil; powerful muscles rippled beneath his coat; chestnut hair tumbled down the back of his neck in a glossy mane. It was true that his hair had begun to thin, for Moschus was a good two hundred years old; he had been a colt in the days when the Beasts had lived on the coast, sharing their secrets with the fast-learning and still friendly Cretans. But age became him as it did the oaks and the cedars.

Physically, at least. His intelligence, never high, had begun to decline before I was born. His noble exterior suggested learning and promised wise utterances, but his only interests were wenching, storytelling (bawdy), and playing the flute, and his conversation was threadbare on all other subjects.

“Heard about you and the kids,” he said.

“Oh,” I said, noncommittal. “Did you?” I did not want him to suggest a meeting. Thea would not understand his libertine ways.

“Big daddy himself. Though I hear the girl is *not exactly a child* (heh).”

"Not in years," I said loftily, "but she's led a sheltered life."

"Time for a party then—lower the parasol! How about tonight?"

"Busy. Tanning hides." I pointed to the pig on my shoulder.

"Tomorrow night?"

"Cutting gems."

A look of suspicion narrowed his equine eyes. "I thought your workers did that."

"Too many gems, not enough help."

"The *next* night?"

"At your house?" I sighed, defeated.

"You're a better host. More beer, more room. Zoe and I will come after lamplighting time."

"Zoe too?"

"Who else? You know we're keeping company." With a loud, anticipatory neigh, he galloped into the trees.

I groaned. Zoe, the Dryad, and Moschus, the Centaur. I loved them devotedly as friends, but together they well might precipitate an orgy.

I knelt to retrieve my sandals, wondering how I would broach the party to Thea.

I found her visiting with my three workers. With the help of Icarus and several bribes of raw meat, she had won their confidence—at least, their acceptance—and often watched them work. Not only were they lapidaries, but blacksmiths, weavers, dyers, shoemakers, and tanners, and their various tools of trade—loom, forge, anvil, assorted vats and tables—lent to my shop the air of a small but handily equipped marketplace. To see only three of them with so much equipment had astonished Thea until I explained that I myself was the fourth worker and, like my extinct countrymen, equal to any four Men or two Telchines. It was not a boast but a simple statement of fact.

The shop was illuminated by six large lamps in the shape of fishtailed ships which navigated the air on swaying chains. One of the workers stood at the forge, holding a bent dagger over the flames; another worked at a table, cleaning the dirt and shale from gemstones;

and the third examined a large carnelian, smoothed to the round flatness of a seal, and bobbed his head in evident perplexity.

Thea was watching the holder of the stone as he turned it over and over between his multiple legs. The room was warm with the heat of the forge, but she looked immaculate in her saffron kilt; as far as I knew she never perspired. Three meticulously arranged curls adorned her forehead like pendant snails.

"Eunostos," she said. "Have you ever seen such a gem?" Its smoky gray surface imprisoned the six fires of the lamps in a small constellation, and the many-faceted eyes of the Telchin reflected them again to numbers beyond counting.

"Would you like it to wear as a ring?" I asked.

She looked like a child who has just been offered a dolphin or a rare, white-plumed griffin. "Oh, yes, but don't you trade these things to the other Beasts?" I had told her how every Beast contributed to the self-sufficiency of the forest: I traded my gems to the Centaurs for seeds to plant in my garden; the Dryads built wooden chests and swapped them to the Thriae for the honey stored in their great hexagons; and even the little Bears of Artemis gathered black-eyed Susans in the fields and strung necklaces to trade for dolls.

"Not this one," I said. "What design would you like?"

She thought. "A blue monkey." Her eyes looked beyond me, wistful no doubt with memories of the palace at Vathypetro, the well-ordered garden, and of course her father. "Is that possible?"

"A blue monkey and—" I whispered to the Telchin. In spite of their skill, they are not inventive, and unless you give them suggestions, they will settle on one design and duplicate it a hundred or more times. Nodding sagely, he set to work with a pointed file.

"May I watch?" Thea asked.

"No," I said. "Surprises are best." And then, unobtrusively: "Thea, some friends are coming to call. After supper, two nights from now."

She reserved judgment. "How many?"

"Just two. A Centaur and a Dryad."

"Zoe," she said. "You've mentioned her several times." It was almost an accusation.

"An old friend," I explained.

"Older than you?"

"Let's see. About fourteen times as old."

"Elderly then."

"Not exactly. Dryads reflect the state of their trees. Zoe's oak is well-preserved."

She stifled a sigh. "But have we enough wine in the house?"

"Beer," I said. "Beer is what they drink. Both of them."

"A woman drinks beer?"

"She can outdrink me!" Then, subdued: "I brew it from barley right here in the shop. You ought to try some."

She smiled magnanimously. "Perhaps I will. You attend to the beer and I will bake some honey cakes." She paused. "It's good I've finished your new tunic."

"Tunic?" I cried. In the spring and summer, no male Beast wore clothes. Why should he? The air which blew from the torrid continent of Libya was warm and dry, and female Beasts were no more disturbed by a free expanse of masculine flesh than Cretan males by the bare breasts of their women.

"Yes," she said, fishing the depths of a basket with nimble fingers. "The Telchines wove it, but I did the dyeing and needlework."

"I see you did." Lavender, with embroidered sleeves. "Why not a loin cloth?"

"For Icarus, perhaps, not for you. You are—well, more mature." She observed the hair on my chest as if she were thinking of scissors. "Try it on now and see if it fits."

The tunic pinched me in seven places. I felt like a snake imprisoned in his old, discarded skin. "I can't move," I said. "I can't breathe. I think I'm going to suffocate. And," I added delicately, "you forgot to leave access for my tail."

"Hush. All it needs is a bit of taking out." She pro-

ceeded to pinch and pat me as if I were no more animate than a side of beef. "Or else you could reduce, if only the party were next week instead of in two nights."

"I can't postpone it," I snapped. "Besides, I'm not fat, I'm muscular." I guided her hand to a stomach as firm and hard as a coconut.

"You're right. Sheer muscle. I'll have to let out the waist."

* * *

As soon as I entered the den, I saw a change. Ever since Thea's arrival, the room had been orderly: No more unwashed dishes stacked by the grainmill; for that matter, no more mill, which now scattered its flour beside the fountain. The change at the moment, however, had been added rather than subtracted. In the glow of a freshly lit lamp, three dove-shaped vases nested among the roots and bristled with poppies out of my garden. The sad little heads of my flowers stared reproachfully from every corner of the room, five heads to a dove.

"You've killed them," I cried. "You've cut their throats."

"Housed, not killed. In the garden, nobody noticed them."

"I did. Every day. Here it's like putting them in jail."

"I shall try to be a kind jailer," she smiled, straightening a flower.

At the mention of jailer, I recalled my own imprisonment in the tunic. Her alterations had not improved the fit, nor had she remembered the access for my tail, which pressed stiffly against my back like a sun-dried reed. As soon as she turned her back to straighten another flower, I filled my chest with air, hoping to burst my belt and split the tunic. I only increased my discomfort. I stared with envy at Icarus in his new loin cloth, which was green and unembroidered. He looked both spruce and comfortable. Thea herself wore a blue, divided skirt almost to her ankles, each side falling in tiers embossed with gold-leaf. Her hair, combed as always to hide her ears, rippled in three rivulets down her back like cascading autumn leaves with faint twinkles of summer's departed green.

On her middle finger she wore the agate ring which the Telchin had already finished incising, not only with a blue monkey but with a Cretan maiden who was unmistakably Thea, receiving from her pet the gift of a crocus. From my whispered description of her garden at Vathypetro, the artist had realized the scene beyond my expectations. After cutting the figures, he had filled them with microscopic particles of lapis lazuli. A scene of play, you would think, but the austere blue stone imparted a dignity and sadness which seemed to say: playful moments endure only in stone.

"It's exquisite," she said, caressing the ring as if it were an amulet to ensure fertility. She came to me and, standing on tiptoe, grasped my horn and drew my cheek to her lips. "Dear Eunostos, you are like a brother to me. I'm glad I had the tunic to give you in return. Otherwise I could never have accepted such an expensive gift."

Above our heads the cowbell tinkled the arrival of our guests.

"We must let them in," said Thea.

I shook my head. "I had better meet them alone. Moschus needs plenty of room on the stairs." I did not want her to hear their comments about my tunic.

But one of my workers, roasting a late chop in the garden, had already opened the door, and Zoe thumped down the stairs like a sack of coconuts. Moschus labored behind her, managing his four legs with obvious difficulty and I half expected to see him lose his balance and tumble head over hooves. At the end of her descent, Zoe caught me in a huge embrace. I submitted rather than responded. Not that I scorned a friendly hug. More than once we had frolicked away the night in the windy heights of her tree. But Thea was watching us with cool, unblinking eyes.

"Thea," I said, "I want you to meet my friends, Zoe and Moschus."

"Little Thea," cried Zoe, opening her arms for another engulfment, and I feared for Thea's ribs.

Smiling thinly, Thea offered her hand. "Eunostos has told me about you."

Zoe looked at her as if with recognition. "Your ears,"

she said. "Are they—?"

Thea evaded the question. "And Moschus," she said, as she reached to steady him down the last stair. "How good of you to come."

"Isn't he pretty," cried Zoe, discovering Icarus in time to hide her embarrassment over Thea's rebuff. "Eunostos, you should have sent me word. I would have worn sandals." She was barefoot as usual and dressed in a gown as dingy and mottled as an old wineskin. When she held out her hand to Icarus, her shell bracelets jangled like tin gew-gaws from the Misty Isles. Icarus ignored the hand and gave her the kind of hug she had given me. A radiant smile suffused her face and flaunted the three gold teeth which a Babylonion dentist, her three-hundredth lover, had left her when they parted. She patted the boy on the head.

"Head's not as big as I thought," she laughed when his mass of hair depressed beneath her fingers. "But there's plenty of room for brains." She looked at me and winked. "Though there might be some things I could teach *him*, eh, Eunostos?"

Icarus was fascinated. The generosity of her breasts, like an overhanging cliff, magnetized his gaze; he seemed to expect a landslide. "I'm a good pupil," he grinned.

Then she turned to me. "Eunostos, have you gotten fat?"

"Certainly not," I said. In truth, I had lost six pounds since Thea's arrival.

"Then why do you hide your belly in that—tunic, is it called?"

"Lavender," snickered Moschus. "Embroidered (heh!)."

"It's a present," said Thea. "From me."

"One of the city styles, I expect," said Zoe. "Well, it's good to keep abreast of the fashions. But Eunostos, I miss than *manly chest*."

But Zoe and Moschus were not our only guests. A minikin figure, no more obtrusive than a shadow, crouched at the foot of the stairs. I recognized Pandia, one of the Bears of Artemis.

"She met us in the woods and wanted to come,"

apologized Zoe. "Since she doesn't drink, you'll hardly know she's here."

She was four feet tall. Her hair was short; in fact, in was fur, but neatly trimmed so that it resembled a felt cap. She wore a fillet of sweetbriar, a necklace of green acorns, a tunic of woodpecker feathers caught at the waist by a belt of rabbit skin, and a pair of kidskin sandals from my own workshop. Her nub of a tail protruded from a small hole in the back of her tunic. Before the coming of Men, it was said, the goddess Artemis had visited Crete and given her love to a bear. Just as the offspring of Pan are the little hooved Panisci, so the offspring of Artemis are the stub-tailed Bears, and the two tribes, who keep their childlike bodies throughout their long lives, mix and propagate from the age of fourteen. Pandia, though, was no more than the ten years she looked.

"Do you mind?" she asked in a small but husky voice. "I heard about the party from one of your workers and came to watch. I don't drink, you know."

"She came to keep me company," said Icarus, though he himself had every intention of drinking. "We've already met from a distance. The day Thea and I crashed in the glider." You might have thought that a boy of fifteen would disdain the company of a little girl, but Icarus never seemed to notice the difference in people's ages. He had a remarkable gift for making youth feel mature and old age young. Foregoing Zoe and her monumental cliffs, he drew Pandia to a bench with moss-filled cushions.

"Here we can watch without getting stepped on," he said.

"When I saw you crash," she was saying, "I expected to find *just bodies* and have to beat off the crows! Then the soldiers came and dragged you off to their camp."

Among my other guests, conversation had died; rather, it had not survived the first stiff exchange of formalities. Zoe's exuberance had faded to a wan smile, and Moschus, who had misinterpreted Thea's help on the stairs, had fixed the girl in a silent, lecherous stare.

"Time for a drink," I called like any practiced host,

and pointed to a large, pitch-covered goatskin of beer, with an upraised hoof for a spout. I handed Zoe a cup and lifted the skin.

"You know I don't need a cup," she said, and took the skin from my hands. Tilting her head, she placed the foot to her mouth and threatened to empty the contents with one resounding gurgle. A thin trickle of beer meandered down her neck and vanished between her breasts like a freshet between two mountains.

"Here, let Moschus have a drink," I said at last. "He looks parched."

Interspersing his gulps with appreciative "heh's," Moschus drank his fill and relinquished the skin.

"Thea?" I asked.

"Why not?" Carefully she wiped off the foot with a linen handkerchief and poured a modest portion into a cup. Dainty as a bird drinking dew from a leaf, she quaffed the liquid.

"Tastes like a good old vintage," she said, resisting a wry face.

"Vintage?" grinned Moschus. "That's beer, dear, and it's fresh from the vat."

To cover Thea's embarrassment, I seized the skin and raised the hoof to my lips. "Moschus, start the music," I cried between gulps. He withdrew a flute from his sole item of clothing, a wolfskin sash, and began to play. The flute was a crude cylinder of tortoise shell, but Moschus' music was wild, sweet, and eloquent with many voices: the slow creaking groan of palm trees in the wind; the tumble of waves subsiding into a long-drawn hiss; the hoot of an owl; the shriek of a hunting wolf. Zoe motioned an invitation to Icarus.

"Go ahead," said Pandia. "I don't dance."

He occupied Zoe's arms, and she led the boy in a sinuous undulation which alternated with leaps in the air and throaty cries of "Evoo, Evoo!"

"The Dance of the Python!" he cried with recognition. "But we haven't a snake." He darted from the floor and Zoe, muttering about the vagaries of youth, cast about for a new partner. I was ready to offer myself when Icarus returned with Perdix. "Our python!"

"Pipe that flute!" cried Zoe, and she flung back her head till her green, gray-streaked tresses bobbed like the snakes of a Gorgon. She was three hundred and sixty-nine years old (a lover for each year, she claimed), and like her tree she looked as if many a woodpecker had mottled her skin and many a storm weatherbeaten her complexion, but beauty had not forsaken her: the full-blow beauty of an earth mother whose ample lap could pillow a lover's head and whose opulent breasts could suckle a score of children. She stirred my blood like a skin of beer.

"My turn," I called.

Restraining fingers caught at my belt. "Mine," said Thea.

"I'll step on your toes," I protested, edging toward Zoe.

"Not in *my* dance." Her fingers were irresistible. "We call it the Walk of the Cranes." We linked hands and she led me through stately, meandering steps like those of the young virgins when they dance beside the River Kairatos, though the music seemed more appropriate to the opium-drugged priestesses of the Great Mother, when they yield themselves to ecstasy, writhe on the ground, and tear the bark from a tree with their savage teeth.

"Your friends are very—" she paused to select a word—"exuberant. I'm afraid they will tire my brother."

"He seems to be holding his own," I observed as the boy and his partner, her capacious bulk grown seemingly weightless, mimicked snakes on the ground and birds in the air, wriggled, writhed, and, waving Perdix between them, leaped with exultant cries of "Evoe! Evoe!"

"Eunostos," she said. "Do you like my dance?"

"Well, it has dignity."

"Yes, but sometimes you men seem to like something more animalistic." A wisfulness softened her voice. She looked even less than her sixteen years, a very young girl whose knowledge of men was limited to a father, a brother, and a few palace retainers. I tightened my grip on her hand.

"I think," she said sadly, "that most men like inno-

cence only because it challenges them to change it into experience."

"Physical innocence, yes," I said. "That we like to change—after all it is merely ignorance. But the innocence of the heart—that is as rare as the black pearls from the land of the Yellow Men, and no honourable Beast wishes to threaten it, any more than he would drop a pearl in a glass of wine and watch it dissolve."

"But the body encloses the heart. When the body falls, what dignity is left to the heart?"

"None, when the body falls, but when it is given, like a proud city to a noble king, then it grows rich, then it enriches the heart."

Against the feverish background of the flute, our shouted words seemed strangely impersonal, strangely divorced from the girl and Beast who spoke them. When the music ended, our words faltered in the great silence.

"That's all," said Moschus, wiping his lips and returning the flute to his wolfskin sash. "Musician wants a drink." But he came at Thea with a thirst which was not for beer.

She disengaged her hand and hurried up the stairs toward the garden and the oven.

Moschus glared after her. "Skittish colt, eh, Eunostos?"

She returned with a heaping aviary of cakes in the form of owls, woodpeckers, swallows, eagles, and partridges, whose piquant scents enwreathed the platter and titillated our nostrils. She was justly proud of her baking.

"Not for me, honey," said Zoe, heading for the beer. "I don't eat while I'm drinking. Spoils the kick."

"Same here," said Moschus, slapping Zoe's flank.

Thea's smile vanished. Her one contribution to the party was being ignored. "Pandia?" she asked doubtfully. Pandia sprang to her feet and converged on the birds, scooping them into her mouth so quickly that they seemed to flutter from the plate.

"You see why I don't drink," she said as she licked the last crumbs from her stubby hands (paws, should I say?). "It would waterlog the food."

Now the drinking began in earnest. Six times I had

to replenish the skin, while Thea followed me, mopping the beer which trickled onto the floor. Moschus watched her and brooded over what he whispered was youth's lack of appreciation for mature years. "She treats me like an old dray," he muttered. Icarus rested his head in Zoe's lap; with one hand, she trickled beer down his throat from a rhyton shaped like a bull, with the other she stroked his pointed ears.

"Sly little Beast," she said in a hoarse whisper. "Why did you take so long to come back to the forest?"

Between swallows he raised his head and caught Pandia's eye. "All right, Pandy?" he called.

Pandia nodded vehemently. She had the look of a child who has caught her parents drinking, but there was no disapproval in the wide, watchful eyes; there was expectation of further excesses.

An increasingly nervous host, I alternated between swigs of beer and anxious looks at Thea, whose expression was dire enough to dismay a Gorgon. Suddenly I felt defiant. It was my house and my friends, and she had no right to mistake our good-natured mischief for misbehaving. A little horseplay on the part of Moschus; Zoe expansively maternal but hardly wanton; Icarus enjoying himself and Pandia enjoying the view. What was the harm in that? I sat down on the rug beside Zoe and twined an arm around the hill of her shoulders. Without displacing Icarus, she lent me the arm with which she had stroked his ears.

"Moschus, there's room for you too," she called with perhaps excessive optimism.

"Thea," I bellowed. "Fetch us some more beer! Your guests are thirsty."

A cold streamer of beer swatted me across the mouth.

"You're drunk," snapped Thea, "and so is Icarus," and, turning to Zoe: "You're to blame!"

Zoe's voice was relaxed. "Dear, your brother is fifteen and it's time he learned to hold his liquor. As for Eunostos, he's hardly begun to drink. You ought to see him after another skin!" She gave a body-wrenching sigh. "However, I expect it's time to go. It's a long way to my tree, and there are Striges about at night, to

say nothing of those thieving Thriac." Still unhurried, with the slow deliberate movements of a mother placing her baby in a crib, she lifted Icarus' head from her lap and cradled it on a cushion.

He looked up at her with sleepy disappointment. "Your lap was softer."

She winked. "Boy, when you want a lap instead of a cushion, came to my tree. It's a royal oak. Eunostos knows the way!"

I saw them up the stairs and across the garden. The silver palm of the fountain swayed in the moonlight; the crude parasol stood like the silk pavilion of an Eastern king; and even the homely oven looked dim and mysterious, fit for incense instead of bread. But the headless stalks of my poppies made me sad, in spite of the moon and its white, ennobling foam.

"Zoe," I said. "Moschus. You will have to forgive her. She isn't used to our ways."

"You think that's it?" smiled Zoe. "Inexperience, innocence, and all that? I would have said she was jealous."

"Of Icarus?"

"Of you."

CHAPTER V:

KORA

I awoke to singing. The singer was Thea in the garden, and her song was about a tiger moth:

His heart is dappled like his wing:

Day-yellow spilled with night.

The tiger-part loves evening,

The moth-part, candlelight.

I disentangled myself from a pile of wolfskins, yawned mightily, and climbed the stairs to investigate her high spirits.

In the garden she was pulling my last carrots out of their earthen burrows. I winced. Of course they were grown to be eaten, but after the decapitation of my poppies, I resented any diminshment of my shrun-

ken plot. Blue monkeys had lined the walls to watch her, and one bold fellow had skittered onto the ground to receive a carrot. I glared at his boldness but only managed to increase his appetite.

She climbed to her feet and smiled. "We're going on a picnic. I'm getting our lunch ready now."

"What should I wear?" I asked. I had not taken time to dress.

"You are dressed exactly right," she said. "Picnics should be informal."

With a lunch of hard-boiled woodpecker eggs, roasted chestnuts, wolf's milk cheese, raw carrots (the last of their race), and honey cakes, together with a flask of wine encased in wickerwork, we headed for the Field of the Gem Stones. Icarus was still drowsy when we left the house. I had carried him up the stairs and held him under the fountain, but the warm water had barely roused him enough to move his feet in a kind of lethargic shuffle. Thea and I talked freely, however, and as soon as our conversation turned to those incorrigible thieves, the Thriae, he began to listen.

"Their women are very beautiful," I said, "if you don't mind golden eyes and billowy wings. But never fall in love with one."

"Why not?" he asked.

"Because," I began, but then we came to the Field of Gem Stones, and I left his question unanswered. Imagine a field which Titan horses have ploughed, with furrows like the troughs of waves in a tempest and enormous boulders poised like ships on the crests. Actually an earthquake had ravaged the land instead of giants, and vegetation—grass, thickets of sweetbriar, and poppies with scarlet heads—had soothed without quite healing the wounded soil; had clung to the curves, the abrupt rises, the sharp pinnacles with wild green tenacity. Thea admired the poppies—picked one, in fact—but shuddered at the savagery of the landscape.

"The earth looks angry," she said. "It is not the handiwork of the Great Mother, but one of those northern gods, Pluto perhaps. It might be his very playground."

"But it's private," I said. "And safe. The furrows shut us from view. The Panisci, you know, love to heckle picnickers. One of them attracts your attention with his goatish antics and his friends make off with the lunch." I brushed off a stone for her seat. "Chalcedony. I'll take it home with us, and my workers will cut you a necklace. You can find just about anything you want here—carnelian, agate, jasper."

No sooner had I laid our basket on a tuft of grass than a small felt hat bobbed above the nearest ridge. No, it was Pandia's hair.

"I smelled the cakes," she said. "They smell like more than you can eat."

"Come and join us," said Icarus, nobly if reluctantly, since the cakes in fact were less than we could eat. Thea had yet to learn the extent of a Minotaur's appetite.

"Too many are bad for you," Pandia explained. "One of my acquaintances—not a friend, fortunately—gorged herself and got so sweet that a hungry bear came out of the trees and ate her. *Ate his own cousin. Didn't leave a crumb.*" As always before a meal, she looked immaculate. She had spruced her tail, cleaned her kidskin sandals, and tied her belt of rabbit's fur in a neat bow with exactly equal ends.

"I've thought of a poem about bears," I said. "It goes:

Bears like berries,
Ras- and blue-,
Speckled trout,
And catfish too.
Best of all,
Bears like snacks
Smuggled out of
Picnic packs!

And here's one about that dreadful bear that ate your acquaintance.

Brownest, broadest,
Hungriest, hairiest—
Of all the bears,
He is the beariest."

"I like your poems, Eunostos," said Pandia. "They are almost as charming as your tail, which is very slender and elegant. But all that business about eating has made me too hungry to appreciate any more recitation."

Icarus handed her our entire supply of honey cakes, packaged in a linen handkerchief. "There are no bears in the neighbourhood," he said.

She ate most of the cakes between two breaths and stuffed the remnants into her tunic.

"Shall we gather stones?" asked Icarus. "The Telchines will polish them for us. We can use our picnic basket."

"I *would* like an amulet to ward off the Striges," she admitted, and followed him up the ridge, fishing a fragment of cake out of her tunic.

Thea, meanwhile, nibbled a carrot so fastidiously that she managed to avoid a crunch. A persistent wind frolicked the hair from her ears and the hand which was not occupied with the carrot replaced the hair.

"Thea," I said, "you look like a circumspect rabbit."

She smiled and wriggled her nose. "But I don't have whiskers."

Then she was not a rabbit but utterly a woman, so soft of hair, so tiny of hand, that I wanted to cry and be comforted on her bosom like a sad child.

"Thea," I whispered.

"Yes, Eunostos."

"Thea, I—"

"Would you like a carrot?"

"No."

"How do you grow them so crisp and yellow?"

"Fertilizer," I said. "Fish heads, mostly." At that point a god or demon possessed me, like the quick flush of heat from a sun which breaks through the clouds on a chilly day. I removed the carrot from Thea's fingers and then I embraced her. To me, the action seemed as natural as taking a shower in the hot plume of my fountain or kneeling in my garden to measure the bud of a poppy. But possessed as I was by the god (or demon), I forgot my strength. Perhaps I was rough;

certainly I was sudden. She lay in my arms like a fawn pierced by an arrow. I have broken her back, I thought. Crushed her fragility with my brutish lust, as if I had taken a swallow's egg in my palm and closed my fingers.

"Thea," I groaned, loosening my grip but still supporting her body. "Are you—"

With unhurried dignity, she disengaged herself from my arms. "Eunostos, I am ashamed of you. You are acting like Moschus."

Better to be insulted, railed against, slapped, than chastised like a naughty child or a mischievous Centaur. Moschus indeed!

Angrily I blurted: "He kisses everyone he meets at the first chance. You've shared my house for a month, and I haven't touched you until today. But I'm not a eunuch."

"I look on you as a brother. I told you that."

"But I don't want to be your brother. I don't feel fraternal at all. Besides, you already have Icarus. I want to be—"

"My father? It's true you're ten years older—"

"No, that's worse. I don't like your father anyway."

"You don't *like* him? But you never met him. He's a **kingly man!**"

"I do know him," I said. "I wasn't going to tell you, but I knew him before you were born."

She gasped. "In the forest?"

"And I knew your mother, the Dryad."

"I don't think I want to hear about her."

"I can't tell you about your father without mentioning your mother." I called loudly: "Icarus, Pandia!"

They hurried over the ridge with dirty hands and a basket of stones between them.

"Is it bears?" whispered Pandia with terror-rounded eyes. "Are we going to be eaten?"

"Not bears," I said. "Something I want to show you."

A mile from the Field of Stones, in a small clearing green with moss and fern, I showed them a fire-blackened stump which had once been a royal oak.

Through the gutted walls, you could see the ruined beginnings of a staircase, spiraling around the trunk and ending abruptly in air.

"Your mother's tree," I said. And I told them about Aeacus, their father . . .

I was nine years old when he came to the forest. My father had built a house of reeds in a tamarisk grove, and after my mother was killed by lightning, we lived alone with the feathery trees shutting away the sunlight and shutting us in with the shadows of our loss. Except at night when I needed a place to sleep, I kept away from the house, preferring to roam the woods where I had gathered chestnuts with my mother and listened to her stories about the coming of our people from the Isles of the Blest. It was in the forest that I met Aeacus—dagger in hand, blood on his beardless face, eyes vacant like those of a Strige's victim. I learned later that he had come into the mountains pursuing Achaean pirates. He and his men had met and killed them just beyond the forest, but only Aeacus had survived the skirmish. Wounded and delirious, he had wandered into the forest, but strength had failed him and he sank to his knees like a murderer before a judge, dropping his dagger, blinking without awareness.

I crept out of the undergrowth. "May I help you, Sir?" I asked from a safe distance, for he was a Man and therefore dangerous.

"He cannot speak." A tall Dryad had come to stand beside me.

"Your dress is sunlight!" I cried.

"Sunflowers," she smiled. "Every morning I weave it anew, since the petals endure only for a day. Like love."

"And your hair is a green waterfall. It sings around your shoulders."

"Perhaps," she said, "it has learned its song from the trees in which I live. Listened to woodpeckers nesting in the branches, or those smaller birds, the wind-ruffled leaves. But now we must help our friend."

"He's a *Man*," I whispered. She did not look as if

she understood the danger.

"And therefore the more to be pitied."

His hair, worn long and drawn behind his head in a fillet, was a wonder of darkness, and his face was as white and smooth as the alabaster from which the Cretans carve the thrones of their kings: such a face as the artisan god, Hephaestus, might carve in his underground workshop — unflawed by toil, untouched by time.

Each of us took an arm and supported him to her tree. She did not invite me to enter the trunk. She smiled when she saw my disappointment; for I had heard of the marvels within a Dryad's tree, the winding stairs cut into the trunk, the secret doors which open onto rooms where noiseless spiders weave in the light of glow-worms, the platforms among the branches, where the Dryads comb their tresses to the soft fingerings of the sun.

"You must not enter, Bull Boy. I am bringing sorrow into my tree, and you have enough of your own."

"He will do you injury?"

"Perhaps."

"Why do you shelter him then?"

"I have lived too long in sunlight."

No Man can enter the forest without alerting the Beasts. All of us, even the light-fingered Thriae and the careless Panisci, take our turns patrolling the narrow access to the world of Men. Everywhere else the cliffs uprear impassable walls (except for my cave, which no one dares to invade). When Aeacus entered the trees, I was not the first to see him. Even as Kora helped him into her house, a conch-shell boomed a warning to all the Beasts, and the next day Chiron, king of the Centaurs, arrived at her tree to question her about the stranger.

"I am going to bear his child," she said.

Chiron was stunned. A human father and a bestial mother! Would the child be a Man or a Beast? Shaking his mane, he left this foolish Dryad to the sorrow of her own choosing.

I was ten years old at the birth of Thea, eleven when Icarus followed her into the tree and laughed with his first breath. High in the branches, a porch surrounded the trunk, with a bench and a bamboo rail. I used to stand on the ground and wait until Kora appeared with the babies.

"Eunostos," she called one morning. "Come and visit with me."

"Through the door?" I asked, hoping at least to glimpse the interior.

"Up the outside ladder."

I saw with dismay that her hair looked as withered as broken ferns, and her gown was woven of brown leaves instead of sunflower petals. She lifted Thea into my arms.

"Is she breakable?" I asked doubtfully.

"Not unless you drop her out of the tree," she laughed.

At first Thea was crying. "I expect it's my hair," I said. "The color has frightened her."

"No," she said. "It's the forest. She always cries when I bring her onto the porch."

I took her tiny hand and placed the fingers on one of my horns. "See," I said. "It won't hurt you. It is like a carrot."

She fell asleep in my arms.

"I want to hold Icarus too," I said. "One baby for *each* arm. They will balance each other." He was much the fattest baby I had ever seen. When no one held him, he would lie in the crib which his mother had hollowed from the shell of a tortoise and coo at friendly woodpeckers or empty air. He made me think of a fledgling which has gorged itself on worms and grown so plump that it has no wish to fly. It would rather stay in the nest and wait for the next worm.

Without telling their mother, I adored both of them, Thea because she was sad, Icarus because he was plump and joyful. Sometimes Kora would let me look after them when she followed Aeacus into the forest (it must have broken her heart to see him walk to the edge of the trees and stare wistfully at the farms across the

meadow). I fed them nectar which I squeezed out of honeysuckle blossoms and made up stories in which I rescued them from wicked bears and slaving wolves. They seemed attentive, both of them, and never fell asleep until I had finished my story, though few of my words could have been intelligible to such young ears.

Soon after Icarus' first birthday, I climbed to the porch and discovered Kora in tears. Since the death of my mother, I had seen my father cry and I knew that the tears of adults were wetter, saltier, and much, much sadder than those of a child like me. I started down the ladder.

"Stay, Eunostos," she said. "It will your last chance to see the children."

I balanced awkwardly on the third rung from the top and rested my chin on the porch. "I'm not to be invited again?"

"They are going away."

"How can you go with them?" I knew that no Dryad could leave her tree for more than a few days. Its wooden walls sustain her as salt water sustains a dolphin.

"Their father is taking them to Knossos without me."

"To the cities of Men!" I cried with dismay. Remember that Beast children fear Men as much as human children fear Beasts. I imagined the babies spit-
ted on sharp spears and served up at a banquet, or lowered on giant fish hooks to bait sharks.

"Their father will protect them," she said. "But they will miss us, won't they, my little Bull?"

"Can they live outside the tree?"

"Aeacus thinks so. He says they have not grown dependent on the tree as I have. That's why he wishes to take them now, before they do." She drew me into her arms as if I were one of her own children.

"Don't be sad," I said, though her news was the worst I had heard since the death of my mother. I rested my horns against the leaf-sweet fragrance of her breast.

Neither of us heard Aeacus climb the ladder. He was not angry; he had no reason for anger. But he looked like a staring pharaoh carved from stone. He drew me from Kora's arms and placed me on the ladder. His fingers were very hard, almost like coral, though he did not hurt me. As I started down the ladder, I screamed:

"You shouldn't take them away from their mother!"

For six mornings I went to Kora's tree, placed an ear to the trunk, and listened to Thea's cries resounding through the bark. But no one appeared on the porch to ask me up the ladder, and when I knocked at the door on the seventh morning, Aeacus answered and closed the door in my face.

The next day I met him in the forest. You have seen the twin panniers on the backs of donkeys? They are baskets for carrying produce home from the market or kindling from the woods. He had rigged such panniers for his children and placed both Thea and Icarus on his back. In spite of the vines which strangled the branches above her head, Thea was poised and smiling, but Icarus was crying almost for the first time.

I sprang out of the trees like the goat-god Pan when he frightens travelers. "Where are you taking my babies?" I demanded in what I meant to be an ear-splitting bellow. But I was small at the time—I lived on roots and berries between the rare occasions when my father remembered to hunt. No doubt my roar emerged as a squeak. Aeacus looked at me vaguely and went on his way as if I were no more significant than a toadstool. I lowered my head and butted him with my horns, expecting to catch the babies if they threatened to spill. He staggered but kept his balance and did not spill them. Turning, he seized my horns and flung me into the bushes. The fall left me stunned.

In seconds, or minutes, I am not sure which, I opened my eyes to hairy haunches and cloven hooves. A Paniscus, looking about twelve but possibly as old as hundred, was dousing my face with milk from a split coconut. I did not remember to thank him, but sprang to my feet and searched frantically for signs of Aeacus

and the children.

"Did you see him?" I cried. "The man from the Cities?"

"Nothing but squirrels," he sulked, hurt no doubt because I had not thanked him for reviving me and sacrificing the milk from his coconut.

I ran toward Kora's tree to see if she knew that Aeacus had taken the children. Perhaps, I thought, she will keep me in their place, and then I felt terribly ashamed at having so selfish a wish at such a time.

A score of Beasts had surrounded the tree: Dryads in great dishevelment, among them Zoe; Moschus and two other Centaurs; Panisci and Bears of Artemis; and even some Thriae, who flock to misfortune as readily as to honey. The tree was a pillar of fire. Branches crackled and fell in a swarm of sparks like glowing bees; the watchers shielded their heads with upraised arms and drew back from the yellow, lashing coils. The high porch had shriveled like a dead insect and begun to peel from the trunk. Yet the verdurous branches still struggled valiantly to hold their greenness against the encroaching fire, for the tree was young by the reckoning of the forest and three times her lightning-blackened branches had sprouted leaves.

"We must save her," I cried, running toward the ladder.

Zoe stopped me. "It was she who set the fire. We must leave her with dignity."

"But he's getting away with her babies!"

"Let him go. He was never a Beast."

"But the babies are *half* Beast."

"Perhaps they will come back when they learn to know themselves."

Icarus hugged me when I had finished the story. "Eunostos, we *did* come back! You got your babies again."

"Yes," I said, "and this time I mean to keep you." I looked at Thea and awaited the inevitable reprimand. She was certain to take her father's side, and already I was angry with her, remembering how she had laughed as that hateful man had carried her out of the forest.

At last she said: "You can't blame him for leaving when he did. He was only thinking of us."

Icarus turned on her angrily. "But he left our mother."

"She always knew he would have to leave her," said Thea. But her eyes had filled with tears, and not, I guessed, for her father.

"Thea," I said. "I didn't—"

Pandia seized my hand. "There is someone watching us."

"A bear?" I smiled.

"Do bears wear helmets?"

Chapter VI:

The Love of a Queen Is Death

The death which comes at the end of a long life, in a warm bed surrounded by loving children, is a lying down and not a darkness; it is not to be feared. But a slow and agonizing death in the fulness of youth is dreadful to men and dreaded even by gods. It was such a death which confronted the forest, though its rightful span was a thousand tearing winters and a thousand springs of healing violets and resurrecting roses.

No one knew at the time; no one knew that the death throes began when Pandia saw the helmet. How could a warrior have entered the forest, I asked, without being seen by the guards? No conch shell had blown to alert the Beasts. Perhaps, suggested Thea, Pandia had glimpsed a spying Paniscus and mistaken his horns for the boar's tusk of a helmet. Still, the mere possibility of Achæan infiltration left us with little appetite for the rest of our picnic. Returning to the Field of Gem Stones to recover our basket, we walked back to the house in thoughtful silence.

The following morning it was almost possible to forget the revelations and alarms of the preceding day. Breakfasting on bread, cheese, and carob pods, Thea did not refer to my unexpected embrace or to my story about her parents. She fed me some choice pods from her own plate and then withdrew to the shop to watch

the Telchines cut some intaglios, while I remained in the garden, wondering what I should plant in place of my carrots. Perhaps a row of pumpkins, as big and friendly as the domestic pigs of the Centaurs. The day was benign; a blue monkey perched on the wall, waiting for Thea to feed him carrots. He would have a long wait.

Icarus emerged from the stairs. His hair was tousled from sleep and very long, rather like a nest in which baby mice have played. He had not yet donned a loin cloth.

"Eunostos," he said. "I want to talk to you." Fifteen years sat lightly on his face, but the weight of a lifetime burdened his voice.

"You miss Perdix, don't you?" I said, trying to ease his very evident burden. The day before the picnic, he had suddenly announced that he had given Perdix his freedom—left him beside a carob tree in the forest. "To find a mate," was his sole explanation.

"No," he said. "Perdix was a child's pet. I am now a man." He used the word in the sense of a full-grown adult and not as a member of the human, as opposed to the bestial, race. We sat down on a stone bench in the shade of the parasol; splinters of sunlight jabbed through crevices in the reeds and teased our shoulders with a tingling warmth. "Aren't I?"

"A man is strong," I said, "and strength makes him kind instead of tyrannical. A man is courageous, not because he lacks fear but because he conquers fear. Yes, Icarus, you are certainly a man, and one I am proud to call my brother."

"But that's not enough," he said impatiently. "Even if I were those things, which I doubt, I am still not manly in other ways. With women." His voice fell to a whisper, as if he ascribed to women the power and the mystery attributed to them in the days of stone implements, before it was known that the husband as well as the wife helped to produce a child. "I am—inexperienced."

I studied him carefully and saw that his body had hardened since he came to the forest; he was tanned and firm, with a down of hair on his cheeks, and I understood why Zoe had looked at him with desire as well as affec-

tion. Manliness mingled with innocence and cried to be awakened to knowledge of its own power.

"And you think I can help you?"

"I know you can. You and Zoe used to be more than friends, didn't you?"

I nodded, with perhaps the hint of a smirk.

"And other women too," he continued. "You must have had hundreds. You're just what they like. A regular bull of a man!"

Almost of itself, my chest expanded to its full dimensions, my tail twitched, my flanks felt the urge to strut. "It's true that one kind likes me. Free-living women."

"One kind *admits* she likes you. Secretly, all of them do. Look at Thea."

The subject intrigued me. "Thea, you say?"

"Can't take her eyes off you. But frankly, the other, non-sisterly kind interests me more. I don't feel up to a long, exhausting courtship. I'm not as young as I was. That's why I want you to take me wenching."

"Wenching," I repeated, possibilities flickering through my brain like a covey of quail. "Suppose we call on Zoe and ask her to fetch you a young friend from the next tree."

"I don't like them young," he said with finality. "Experience, that's what I want. You see—" he paused in acute embarrassment. "I am not very practiced. The palace at Vathypetro limited my education. What does one talk about at such a time?"

"Compliments," I said. "One after another like pearls on a necklace. Give them something to wear—a bauble or an intimate garment such as a breast band—and then elaborate on how it becomes them. With my shop and workers, that's no problem. Jewels, sandals, whatever they like I've got."

"But you can't talk *all* the time," he said darkly. "Thea tried talking to Ajax when we were captives, but Ajax got tired of listening. He pushed her against the wall, and she had to use her pin. He wasn't a conversationalist, and neither am I."

"You'd be surprised how naturally the rest comes after the right gift and compliment. With the right

woman, that is."

"The right woman. "That's what I want you to help me find. And another thing. When I just *think* about wenching, I feel—well, a kind of fire creeping over my body. Arms. Chest. Stomach. Like a lizard with hot feet, if you know what I mean."

"The problem," I said, "is to find another lizard. We'll visit Zoe tomorrow. We'll ask her—"

"Eunostos! Icarus!" Thea called from the stairs.

"Later," I whispered in the conspiratorial tone of men discussing their favourite subject under grave risk of detection. "Here comes the watchdog."

"Eunostos, look at the intaglio I've cut!" she said, coruscating into the garden. She blazed in a lemon tunic which vied with the sun and gave her the look of a lithe young huntress; she had caught her hair in a knot behind her head and left her ears in piquant, pointed nakedness. I half expected a bow in her hand and a quiver at her back. Proudly she flaunted a large agate incised with the figure of a lion-haunched, eagle-headed griffin, the awesome but docile beast which the early Cretans had kept as pets in their palaces. "Where is Icarus? I wanted to show him too."

Icarus had left the garden. "I have no idea," I said, as convincingly as a bad liar can manage, though I had an idea of Icarus blithely making for a certain tree and a certain lady. The sly calf! He had wanted a woman of years and experience and no young friend from the next tree. I hoped that Zoe had told him the way.

"He shouldn't walk in the forest alone. If Pandia did see a warrior—"

"You can't keep him under foot all day. He isn't domestic, you know."

"No, I suppose not. He *has* seemed restless lately. Probably he needs a good walk in the forest to stir his blood. Call me when he returns, will you, Eunostos? I have to get back to the shop."

"Thea," I called after her. "Your ears—"

"Yes?" she smiled.

"Are very charming."

Icarus, as he later explained, had gone to visit Zoe. Not knowing the way, he looked for Pandia to guide him. When he failed to attract her with calls and whistles, he hit on the plan of picking some blackberries which he ate or spilled as he walked. Pandia was not long in appearing to share the berries. No, she could not tell him the exact location of Zoe's tree—there were dozens of Dryads, after all—but she knew that it was close to some large beehives where she often gathered honey. She would lead him to the hives and perhaps they would meet someone who could give them further directions. She took his hand in case there were bears on the prowl.

"Your hand is sticky," he remarked.

"Oh," she said, "I missed some," licked her fingers to the last adhering seed, and reclaimed his hand. "You know," she resumed, "you ought to wear a loin cloth."

"You think so?" said Icarus, flushing. In his hurry to leave the house, he had quite forgotten to dress.

"To hide your lack of a tail. It makes the back of you look lonesome." She moved to weightier subjects. "Are you going to have beer with Zoe?"

"Possibly," said Icarus. The thought occurred to him that the warm stimulus of beer might loosen his tongue and inspire him to dazzling compliments. Having come without a gift, he felt at a disadvantage.

"I wonder if she will have some cakes in the house."

"No," he said with authority. "She never keeps honey cakes. There is no need for you to go in with me. Or even wait." Secretly, he hoped to linger with Zoe for several days, exploring the hidden tunnels and leafy porches and learning the harder steps in the Dance of the Python. He felt an unaccustomed and wholly exhilarating freedom. The voluptuous foretaste of manhood wetted his appetite like a roasted almond. He pictured Thea and Eunostos coming to Zoe's tree, and himself ensconced in a bark parapet and calling down to them: "Don't wait up for me. I'm spending the night."

They slithered through a thicket of bamboo, the slender, jointed canes as tall as their heads, the light green leaves rustling about their bodies like papyrus. Those consummate farmers, the Centaurs, said Pandia,

in their ancient wanderings, had imported the seeds from the Land of the Yellow Men.

Emerging from the thicket, they met a young man who seemed to be waiting for them. "You must be looking for my sister," he said. Icarus noticed the sickly softness of his flesh; he was not fat but he seemed without muscle, and his skin looked as if it would yield to the touch like the soft meat of a blowfish's belly. Otherwise, he was not unattractive: a golden down covered his arms and cheeks as if they had been dusted with pollen; his eyes were round and extraordinarily gold; and his tall wings were as black and pointed as the fin of a shark.

"Icarus, don't listen to him," hissed Pandia in a very audible whisper. "He is one of the Thriae. He may be planning to rob us."

"And what would I steal, your belt of rabbit's fur?" he smiled scornfully. "I am not stealing today, I am giving. Would you like to know what?"

Icarus did not intend to ask him. He resented the fellow's remark about Pandia's belt.

"What?" asked Pandia.

"Sisters," he said. "Or rather, one sister. Isn't that what you are looking for, Icarus? A man can recognize the look in another man's eyes. It says: I am tired of hunting and tired of gardening, of a man's work and the company of other men. I want soft lips and the teasing fragrance of myrrh, I want soft hands and the silken brush of hair."

"I am going to call on Zoe, the Dryad," said Icarus. (How, he wondered, had the young man learned his name?) "Do you know where she lives?"

"I know where everyone lives." He captured Icarus' arm and guided him through avenues of lofty carob trees, whose branches were freighted with pods like those which Thea had eaten for breakfast, while Pandia trailed behind them, peeling her eye in case the fellow should prove a thief after all and wish to steal her belt (or, horror of horrors, her pelt). Icarus, of course, had nothing to lose.

They stepped into a meadow riotous with flowers and murmurous with bees; flowers jabbing from the ground

on pillar-straight stalks or undulating in green torrents of foliage; and bees which wavered above them like a black and golden nimbus and then exploded upward like sparks from a lightning-blasted tree and disclosed the cinnabar walls of black-hearted poppies, the lemon of green-backed gagea, the purpler-than-murex of hyacinths beloved by the gods. From just such a garden, thought Icarus, all the flowers of the earth, even the tame crocuses grown at Vathypetro, had come in the time before men, transported by bees and migratory birds and swift nomadic winds.

In the very midst of the flowers, a vine-covered pole like the mast of a ship uplifted a light-seeming house with hexagonal walls of reeds, a thatched roof of dried water lily fronds, and opaque windows of waxed parchment. The first storm, you felt, would scatter the walls and collapse the roof. A summer house, hardly more enduring than flowers and hardly less beautiful: built to please and not to endure.

"Here," said the guide, "is the house."

"But Zoe lives in a tree."

"This is my sister's house."

Lifting aside a curtain of rushes, a young girl appeared in the door and looked down at Icarus with a confidence which seemed to say: "You will soon come up to me."

"Icarus," she chided. "You took your time in coming to call."

"How do you know my name? I don't know yours."

"The whole forest has heard about the handsome boy who has come to live with Eunostos, the Bull. And also about his sister, the very fastidious Thea, who keeps a watchful eye on both of her men. Does she know that her little brother is up to mischief?"

Icarus bristled. "It's no business of hers if I am."

"And what would she think of me? The wanton Amber, soliciting innocent boys."

"She would think you were very pretty." Indeed, she was smooth and bright as a tiger lily from the Land of the Yellow Men, with gold, violet-flecked eyes which did not change expression even when her lips curved to a smile, but looked like hungry mouths. When she spoke

he saw that her tongue was long, thin, and freckled with gold like her eyes. She was even smaller than Thea. It should not be hard for her long wings to lift so small a body, thought Icarus. A winged lily she was, with catlike, sinuous grace; scarcely a girl at all except in the tightness she brought to his throat and the lizard with fiery feet she lashed across his limbs.

"Would you like to see my house?" she asked. "You will find it refreshing after your walk."

"I am going to call on Zoe," he repeated, with decidedly less enthusiasm than the first time he had made the announcement.

She laughed. "I think you are afraid of me. Of all women, perhaps, except little Bear Girls and blowsy old ladies like Zoe. Possibly you would prefer my brother. In the Cities of Men, I am told, the love of a man for a man is not uncommon. You will find it the same with drones like my brother. Among my people, the Thriae, queens like myself are rare and workers are no more excitable than a drudging mule. What can the poor drones do except console each other? They succeed rather well, I am told." She turned to her brother. "Does Icarus please you, my dear? He is succulent as a fig, and no bees, I think, have rifled his hive."

Her brother smiled and smiled; his golden tongue flickered between his moist lips and he did not need to speak.

"I've changed my mind," said Icarus to the girl. "How do I climb to your door?"

She lowered a ladder with rungs of cowhide. "When you've tasted my honey, you will feel as if you have wings. You will hardly need a ladder."

As he placed his foot in the first rung, Pandia caught at his arm. "I'm coming too."

"She hasn't any honey cakes, Pandia."

"She said honey, didn't she?"

"I think she meant hospitality."

The Bear Girl was close to tears. "It isn't really cakes I want. I don't want her to hurt you, that's all. She is a wicked woman. I can tell by the way she darts her tongue."

Laughter tinkled silverly above their heads. "Do you think me wicked, Icarus? Perhaps I am. How else would I know the thousand paths to pleasure?"

Hand over hand, his feet sinking in the hide of the rungs, Icarus climbed to the door. Amber gave him her hand and drew him over the threshold.

There were wicker chairs suspended from the ceiling on tenuous chains of grass. There were hangings of spider-spun silk through which the walls revealed their ribs of reed. Most of all, it was a room of flowers, which glowed in mounds like the heaped treasures spilled in Egyptian tombs when thieves are caught at their theft. One of the walls was coated with polished wax which mirrored the room like a misty garden and Amber's face as the queen-liest of the blossoms. Surely, thought Icarus, no evil can touch me among so many flowers—there are even bees at work collecting nectar.

And yet the garden was captured; shut from the sunlight. He saw that Amber had quietly withdrawn the ladder.

"You have caught my friends at their trade," she smiled, pointing to the bees above a mound of jonquils. "Those are my workers. When the nectar enters their sacks, their bodily juices turn it into honey. Then they eject it into waxen trays and heat their wings to evaporate the water, leaving pure honey, which I in turn will trade for silks, jewels, and gold. Your own Eunostos has sometimes traded me bracelets. But you must not think that I also am a worker. I am a queen." She spoke the word with such impassioned pride that a crown seemed to glitter above her head and murex-coloured robes tremble about her shoulders.

"What does a queen do?" He rather hoped that her answer would be mysterious and provocative. He was not disappointed.

"She lives like a flower, only for pleasure. For soft breezes and warm suns, the solicitations of butterfly and hawk moth, and all the sweet indolences of a vegetable existence. But one pleasure is known to her which the flowers cannot comprehend."

He waited for her to reveal the name of this rarest

pleasure.

"The gift of a man's embrace," she said at last, carressing the words as if they were priceless silk. "Shall I tell you the wealth of your own beauty? Number your masculine graces until a young god walks before the eye of your mind?"

"Would you?" he asked. He could not think of a more reassuring catalogue.

"A head of noble dimensions aureoled with luxuriant hair. A body swelling to manhood, the strong sinews of maturity asleep beneath the down of youth." She looked at him with a look between calculation and desire. "My dear, I am weary of butterflies. I crave the golden savagery of the bumble bee."

"I'm afraid," said Icarus, "that you want Eunostos instead of me. I think like a bumble bee, but I haven't learned how to buzz."

She seated him in one of the chairs suspended from the roof. She handed him a dish of pollen; she heated wine in a copper vessel over a small brazier and poured honey into the steaming liquid. "Drink," she said.

"Pleasure will stir in your veins even as the wine carresses your throat. Powerful wings will seem to beat at your shoulders."

He emptied the cup with one quick swallow. Was it a sudden breeze through the thin door of rushes? Was it the pounding of his own heart which swayed the chair into motion and disembodied him from the honied room and the weight of his limbs? Or did he move at all except in his mind?

She took his hand and steadied him onto his feet and led him inexorably to a mound of flowers. "Don't be afraid of crushing them," she said. "They have already yielded their gold, and now they are useless."

He felt as heavy as bronze. Insubstantiality had deserted him; reawareness of flesh, the imprint of stems against his bare body, and yes, the fiery feet of the lizard, assaulted his senses. Her hand touched his chest like a brand.

But her gold hypnotic eyes stared drowsiness into his limbs, and the sharp stems began to caress him like cool little tongues. He knew that he ought to crush her

in his arms, possess her lips like a ravenous Ajax. Mimic the bumlebee and not the butterfly. But he seemed to be falling asleep. Zoe, he thought wistfully, Zoe aroused me to dance, but Amber puts me to sleep. Perhaps it is not I who am to blame.

Her face came toward him, a hungry golden moon, and swallowed him into the sky . . .

The cowbell rang as peremptorily as if it had been returned to its cow. When I opened the door, Pandia clutched my hand. She had lost her belt and scuffed her sandals.

"That woman has got him in her hive," she breathed, as Thea appeared behind me.

"A Thria, you mean?" I gasped, incredulous, then comprehending. The queens were too diminutive to crave the embraces of Centaurs or Minotaur, and the small, hairy Panisci held no allurements for them. But a boy like Icarus—why had I never thought to warn him? Why had I failed to answer his question the day of the picnic?

"Yes. He climbed up the ladder and sent me away."

"Show us the house," cried Thea, and Pandia gulped some air and gamely trotted ahead of us

The house loomed above our heads, as closed and apparently inaccessible as a tortoise shut in its shell. The girl had withdrawn the ladder, the doors and windows were closed. But for once my height proved a boon. I grasped the narrow ledge in front of the door and drew myself onto the sill. Flinging aside the curtain of rushes, I burst in the room. The sweetness hit me like syrup flung from a cup; at once it teased and sickened. The murmuring bees sounded like flies as they buzz around a dead body. I saw the ladder coiled inside the door, and I saw Icarus, pale as foam, in the Thria's arms.

I lunged through mounds of flowers; the bees scattered before me, roaring, and returned to sting my legs. I did not feel them. I seized the girl by the wings and tore her off my friend as one tears a crab away from a stricken fish. She whimpered but did not fight me. There was something loathsome and predatory about her; or worse, scavenging, for she lacked the bold courage of the pre-

dator. She preyed on helpless boys.

"It is too late," she smiled. "I have breathed death into his lungs."

"Lower the ladder," I gasped with a voice which was frozen between rage and anguish. She moved toward the door. I saw that she meant to escape. I sprang between her and the door and threw the ladder to Thea and Pandia.

"Watch her," I said as they climbed into the room.

When Thea saw Icarus, she paled and held back a cry, but she did not wallow in useless hysterics. To Amber she said:

"Help my brother, or I will tear the wings from your back."

"There is only one way to help him," I said. "I must try to draw the poison from his lungs."

"Let me," said Thea. It was not composure she showed, which implies a want of feeling, but courage wrestled from fear. She had hated and feared the forest; now she was facing its most insidious threat without dismay. "Let me, Eunostos. He is my brother."

"And my friend," I said.

"It may prove fatal to you?"

"Yes." I pressed my mouth to his colorless lips. Like a hunter drawing the venom from the bite of a snake, I sucked the air which Amber had breathed from her noxious lungs. It did not burn, but entered my throat insidiously like a thick oozing of honey.

How suddenly small he seemed, how limp and white and seemingly lifeless! The yearning came to me that he should be my son by Thea: I kissed her, kissing him, and then we laughed through the forest, each of us holding his hand. Now he was a small boy with a large head, and now an infant swinging on our arms, the child I had loved in Kora's treehouse. Icarus, Icarus, my son, breathe your poison into my lungs, for I am like your father, and a father's part is to guard his son from the Striges of the night and the Ambers of the day; to take the arrow intended for his vulnerable breast, the flung stone, the rending claw. What is love but a shield of hammered bronze?

My head fell against his cheek, and sleep possessed

me like a falling of leaves

Daylight flooded the room. I saw that Thea had taken my place with Icarus; first, she must have broken the parchment out of the windows and flooded the room with light and air.

"Thea," I whispered. "Now we have both been poisoned."

"Divided the poison," she said. "That is the difference."

Icarus opened his eyes and spoke sleepily. "There was honey in my lungs. It was very sweet. It made me want to sleep." Like a child in a warm bed with stuffed animals, he drew us close to him.

"You mustn't sleep now," I said. "There is still poison in your body." I helped him to his feet. He took a faltering step, caught my arm, and managed to cross the room without help.

"I am ready now," he said.

Thea watched him with pride, as if he were learning to walk for the first time. No sooner had he crossed the room however, than she flung an accusing question:

"Icarus, why did you come to this house?"

He spoke without apology. "I was going to call on Zoe. I lost my way."

She flared like a pine-knot torch. "Your friend, Eunostos. He was going to see your friend! You sent him to her, didn't you?"

"No," I said, "but I intended to take him myself the next day."

"You wanted to lie with her. Both of you. To lie with a harlot."

Harlot indeed! Zoe, the kindest of women, Anger made me eloquent, and also cruel. "She is warm, generous, and womanly. It's true that she gives her body. But you give nothing. Your body has no more warmth than a drift of snow. I was happy until you came. I had my friends, my house, and my garden, and no one asked me to behave like a eunuch. What did you do? Despised my friends, changed my house, and picked my flowers. Zoe is better than you, in spite of her lovers. She at least is a woman and you are a bloodless prude."

She slapped me across the mouth before I had time to regret my accusation. I shoved her onto the floor. She fell with a startled gasp and sat in a mound of poppies like an image of the Great Mother on a throne of flowers, but without the Mother's composure.

"Icarus," she wailed, as if to say: "Give me a hand and take your sister's part against this brute."

But Icarus let her sit. "We are still going to call on Zoe," he said.

"Watch the bee woman," warned Pandia. "She's up to something."

Exchanging accusations, we had quite forgotten the cause of our quarrel. Pandia had been more vigilant.

"I've kept an eye on her," she said. She had taken a stance at the door with fire tongs in her hand. "If she had tried to get by me, I would have let her have it. But she's starting to cry, and that must mean a trick."

Indeed, she had crouched among her now beeless flowers, and silent tears had diamonded her cheeks.

Icarus went to her side. "We are not going to hurt you."

"You think I am weeping from fear?"

"Remorse then?" I asked. "Isn't it a little late?"

"I am weeping for myself," she said, "and my own pitiless heart. He lay in my arms, frightened and gentle—a boy's innocence and a man's body. Intimately lovable, infinitely pitiable. Yet I could not love him. I could not pity him. And so, when I saw the three of you hurling the anger which is another face of love, I wept for envy. I wept my first and my last tears. I live in a house of flowers, but I pick them only for their honey and never regret the crushed petal or the broken stem. I will always be a seeker of honey, it seems. The honey of flowers—or gold."

"Gold?" I asked with suspicion. "Someone paid you, didn't he? It was not your wish to love which made you seek our Icarus. You were paid to kill him with your kisses!"

She began to laugh. "What will you pay me to learn who paid me?"

"Your life."

She looked at my knotted fist and powerful hooves. "Achaeans. As they paid the rest of my people. We have let some of their scouts enter the forest."

"The Man called Ajax?" cried Thea. "Was he among them?"

"Yes. He has given us bracelets and offered a tortoise shell full of gold to the one who kills or betrays you into his hands. You, Icarus, and Eunostos. To get you, he will even launch an invasion."

Chapter VII:

Invasion

We reached the lands of the Centaurs shortly before twilight. Moschus and his countrymen were fighters as well as farmers, the strongest of the six tribes of Beast, and their leader Chiron was the uncrowned king of the forest. We were coming to tell them about the treachery of the Thriae. In times of peace, each of the tribes retained and jealously guarded its independence, but in times of danger everyone looked to Chiron: for example, the cold winter when the wolves came down from the mountains to steal our game and children. "Dip your arrows in the juice of the wolfs-bane root," suggested Chiron. We routed the wolves with our first charge, and Moschus acquired his sash.

We crossed an irrigation ditch and entered a trellised vineyard where little kernels, green and hard like sea grapes, would sweeten and purple with approaching summer until they lured the bees even from the houses of the Thriae; an olive grove whose silver leaves had tarnished with the dying sun to the fitful sheen of old jewelry; and then a grove of palm trees imported from Libya and nurtured to the date-clustered, full-branched opulence of a desert oasis. Next, we skirted the enclosed compound of the cattle, whose fence of sharpened stakes withheld nocturnal bears and the occasional hardy wolf which still descended from the mountains, and came to the wall-less town of the Centaurs.

I walked to the edge of the moat and peered at the

sharpened stakes which bristled from its depths like the teeth of a barracuda. A surer defense than walls, I thought with a shudder. And yet the shrewd Achaeans were not likely to balk at such an obstacle. I knew of their battering rams which, if two were placed end to end, could erect a narrow bridge, and I noticed a clump of olive trees dangerously close to the moat and offering cover to an enemy wishing to cross in the dead of night.

"Chiron," I boomed, and the tallest and kingliest of all the Centaurs detached himself from his friends and galloped toward us along a path which was strewn with sea-shells.

"Eunostos," he neighed, rearing to a halt on the other side of the moat. "We don't hear that bellow often enough. And I see you've brought your new friends, and little Pandia, hungry no doubt." He entered a low wooden tower with a flat roof, and presently a narrow, railed drawbridge, supported by bronze chains, eased over the moat with the soundlessness of a great eagle descending from the sky (it was one of my own designs). We met on the bridge and I told him about the Thriae.

His face darkened. "I am not surprised. They are capable of any mischief. We will have to take steps."

We followed him into the town. His mane seemed a drift of snow, newly fallen and not yet hard, and his wide, unblinking eyes held the blue clarity of a lake in the Misty Isles on one of those rare days without mist. His eyes saw everything; they could hold anger but never rancour. They understood and sometimes even judged, but they never condemned. He was not an ascetic, you understand. Those who live close to the soil like the Centaurs, growing crops and raising cattle, always keep something of earth in their veins and in their faces. They are farmers and not philosophers. But earth in Chiron had been purified to the white, finely sifted sand of a coral beach.

The bamboo stalls of the Centaurs were twinkling on their lights. They were long, slender houses built of bamboo, with pointed roofs and open ends, and above each threshold hung a lamp enclosed in an orange parchment and called a "lantern" and a small wicker cage

which held a humming cricket, the luck of the house (remember, the Centaurs had travelled to the Land of the Yellow Man). At night the Centaurs slept on their feet, leaning against the wall, which they covered with silken tapestries from the looms of the Dryads to ease their sensitive flanks, and resting their hooves in a carpet of clover, renewed each morning by the diligent females while their husbands worked in the fields.

Some of the males were bathing in terracotta tubs adapted to their long frames and ending with a trough in which they could rest their arms and head. They snorted and flailed their legs and kicked water at friends who happened to pass within their range. The females were building fires in front of the houses or cleaning the hoes and rakes which the males had brought from the fields or feeding the small, plump, and immaculate pigs which they kept for pets as Men keep dogs or monkeys. My good friend Moschus erupted from one of the tubs and, lathered with konia, a cleansing lye with a base of ashes, cantered to greet us. He nodded curtly to Thea, paternally to Icarus, and seized both my hands. Before he could hint for an invitation, Chiron told him our news.

"Blow the conch, will you, Moschus?" he asked. "It is time for a conclave."

Moschus blew the conch as forcefully as he blew the flute, and an oceanic summons compounded of many sounds—the indrawing tide, the foaming disintegration of waves as they meet the beach, the bodiless wails of drowned mariners—boomed implacably across the land. The Centaurs dropped their tools, forsook their baths, and, accompanied by their pigs, followed us to the theatrical area in the center of town, a round pit open to the sky, circled with flaring torches, and ringed with twelve stone tiers of seats. It was here that they performed their dramas in honor of the Great Mother, whom they call the Corn Goddess, and her son, the Divine Child, and raised their resonant voices in dithyrambs of praise.

After the Centaurs came the other Beasts: the Panisci from their burrows, annoyed at being summoned before they had stolen their supper; the Bears of Artemis, who, roused from their hollow logs, were rubbing their eyes

sleepily and combing their fur with combs of tortoise shell; the Dryads, tall and beautiful like their trees and redolent of bark and the tender buds of spring. And of course the Thriae, ignorant, it seemed, of Amber's betrayal. They fluttered out of the sky in three swarms, the drones with busy titterings and quick feminine jerks of their wings; the workers dour, unsmiling, and heavy of movement, as if encased in armor; and last, three of the queens (Amber, the fourth, did not appear) with their dignity somewhat lessened by the heavy gold bracelets jangling on their arms.

Chiron, lord of the Centaurs, descended the twelve stone tiers and entered the pit. No sooner had he raised his noble head than silence enveloped his audience. You could hear the bleat of a sheep in the compound of the animals, and close at hand, the peremptory squeal of a pig, whose master silenced him with a thump to his tail.

Chiron spoke. His words had the ringing urgency of a trumpet blast. "Grave charges have been made. Grave warnings offered. We will hear from Eunostos, our esteemed friend."

Rustic that I am, gardener and artisan, I have no skill at oratory (though perhaps a modicum as a poet), and the sullen crowd dismayed me. Summoned without explanation, they poised rather than sat and waited to be cajoled and convinced—except for my friends, who stood on the edge of the pit. Thea was smiling encouragement; extending her little hand in a gesture of affection and support. Pandia was trying her best to look attentive and conceal the fact that she would rather eat supper than listen to a speech. Icarus looked—well, worshipful. Whatever I said would sound inspired to him.

I spoke: "Ever since we came to the forest to escape the harassment of men, we have lived in peace and abundance. Each of us has worked in his own way to make his own contribution. Each of us has done what the Great Mother designed him to do. Our hosts, the Centaurs, have supplied us with produce from their well cultivated farms. The Dryads have woven silk on the looms in their trees. The Thriae, the Bears of Artemis, the Panisci—need I remind you of their skill and their dedication?"

(It was also unnecessary, I felt, to remind them that the Thriae had always made good thieves as well as workers). "In the past, we have been content to live to ourselves. Self-completeness has been our aim and our achievement. No longer. One of our tribes has hungered for foreign gold."

I paused, not for dramatic effect like a Centaur reciting a dithyramb, but to catch my breath and find the words for my peroration. I had caught their interest. Now I must goad them to action.

I pointed my finger at the queens of the Thriae. "There stand the guilty Beasts—traders for gold and traitors to our people. I have it from the mouth of their fourth queen that she and her people have accepted gold to betray my friends into the hands of the Achaeans. To gain this end, they have promised to help the Achaeans invade the forest."

INVASION! An audible gasp, incredulous, astonished, rippled along the tiers like a wind in the boughs of a palm tree. Such was the fear which our bestial characteristics—horns, hooves, tails—had inspired among Men, such was our isolation among the mountains, that invasion had never threatened us in all the years since the Beasts had come to the forest. Only Aeacus, by our own sufferance, had strayed among our fastnesses and returned to Knossos with tales or silences to strengthen our legend. Nevertheless, Chiron and other elderly beasts remembered the time when we had lived near the sea and pirates had landed in Gorgon-prowed ships to burn our farms and capture slaves. Remembered the splintering doors, the red dragons of fire constricting their coils around our reed-built houses, the cries of infant Panisci caught in nets and Dryads dragged by their hair through burning olive groves . . . the haughty sneer of the Cretan king when those who survived the attack demanded justice: "Protect your own. I am not responsible for the chance attack of pirates" . . . the final agonizing decision to retreat to the safety of the forest and forsake the Men with whom we had lived in harmony for many centuries . . . the angry farmers, reluctant to lose our help in the fields, trying to stop us and Chiron confronting them

with a terrible ultimatum: "Prevent our flight and Blue Magic will destroy your crops" Centaurs burning the fields at night with a cloud of fertilizer blackened vines in place of luxuriant vineyards and terrified farmers urging us on our way with gifts of milk and cheese and all the while exalting us into Legend, not Men, not Beasts, but four-legged, cloven-hoofed demons who could blight the crops with their evil, witching eyes

Chiron advanced to the edge of the pit and leveled a steely gaze at the three queens. "What is your answer to these charges brought by Eunostos?"

One of the queens, the oldest, made her way down the tiers and occupied the pit as if it were a throne. A wizened woman, with mottled skin and huge golden eyes, she had hidden her arms with bracelets which clattered when she walked.

Her voice was honey and salt. "His human friends have bewitched our good Eunostos. Whatever plot is afoot, it is they—the girl and her brother—who have perpetrated it, and we poor Thriae are its victims. I know of no gold from Achaean soldiers, unless it has gone to the witch-child Thea and her big-headed brother."

"And this?" I asked, pointing to a bracelet strung with miniatures of the death masks worn by Mycenaean kings. "Did you get this from my shop?"

She looked at her wrist. "Where else? Your workers traded it to me for six jars of honey."

"No Telchin made it," I said. "In my shop or anywhere else in the forest. They can only copy what they have seen. Death masks belong to Mycenae and Tiryns."

She shrugged. The Thriae are quick to lie and brazen when they are caught. Her wings unruffled, she said: "Suppose it is true that we accepted a few Achaean bracelets in return for the human children. If we let your Thea and Icarus stay in the forest, they will surely bring evil down on us just as their father did. Need I remind you that their mother, Kora, was burned to death in her tree? My people and I merely wish to see these dangerous intruders driven from our midst. We did not conspire to see the forest invaded. If you do fear inva-

sion, I suggest you deliver the children to us, and we in turn will give them to the Achaeans and remove all threat."

"She calls us the human children," protested Icarus. His voice was strong and compelling. "She does us a terrible wrong. By her own admission, our mother was the Dryad Kora. Look at my ears and tell me I am a Man!"

"Keep the children! They belong here as surely as I do." It was Zoe. I wanted to hug her.

And Moschus: "Keep the children!"

"KEEP THE CHILDREN!"

Welling from a hundred throats, the plea had become a command, sharp, imperious, not to be denied. The old queen fluttered her bulging eyes, but Chiron silenced her before she could speak.

"Keep them we will. Defend them we will against invaders. And you," he blazed at the queen, "you and your people are no longer welcome at our counsels or in our forest. Go to the men who have bought you with gold. Tell them that they attack us at their risk."

The queen smiled and her thick lips writhed like a jelly fish. "Have you shields?" she asked, "to withstand the bite of their axes? Have you greaves and breast-plates and helmets? I think we will soon be returning with the conquerors. Fatten your pigs to feast us when we come."

The Centaurs closed their hooves protectively around their pigs and shrank from the opening wings of the drones, who, tittering nervously, kicked themselves from the ground with a decorous lilt of their toes. The workers lumbered after them, their customary sullenness darkened to a glowering rage, and the three proud queens ascended the sky as if they were climbing the stairs of a palace and extinguished themselves in the labyrinth of night.

— To be concluded —

The master of the occult and the fantastic shows in this story a gratifying command of the matter-o-fact—with a twist.

ROOM WITH A SKEW

by John Rackham

Fred is my friend, and he has a flair, which is all very fine, but there are times when I wish he was a bit more ordinary. We share a flat—because it helps with the rent—in the Bell Road, almost bang opposite the Power Station, which is where Fred works. They have my sympathy, in there. At the far end of the same road, under the bridge, is the hired-by-the-hour section of the great glass and steel building which houses International Computers Limited, and that's where I work. All very handy and convenient, if only it wasn't for that flair. And now, this Saturday morning, there was this letter, just to complicate matters.

"It's from my Aunt Mabel" I told him, not passing it over, because my respected aunt still tends to think of me as a small and grubby schoolboy and I gave up being that many years ago. I translated the embarrassing language for him—the gist of it, anyway. "She'll be in London for the week-end and will be staying here with us on Sunday night."

"Oh yes?" he said, and then, in a different tone, "Oh NO! She can't. We haven't got the room!"

"Yes we have. We have room. One room. The spare room."

"But it's full of junk!"

"Yes. I know. It's your junk. You shift it. Have it all out of there by noon tomorrow, all right?"

"Talk sense" he said, excitedly. "Have you looked in there, lately?"

"Not in a month or two" I repressed a shudder. "The

kind of junk you collect is a bit of a strain on the eyes. All I want you to do is to shift it. By noon tomorrow. That will give me time to air the bedding and linen and get the spare bed assembled."

"How about you lending a hand, then?"

"Sorry. Apart from the linen and so forth, I have stacks to do. It will take me most of today to process the data on that incredible coil you rigged up, in between doing my day's work. Then, on the way home, I shall be picking up a new micro-ammeter, to replace the one you lost. After the kind of day I'm going to have I shall be in no mood to humour the salesman in Bailey's but I shall have to, because we already owe him quite a bit for the stuff we've already had from there. Why you can't lose or ruin the stuff you manage to swipe from work I shall never know. But there it is, if anything bets busted, it is always some expensive item we have to buy."

"You don't know what you're asking" he groaned. "Come and look at it." Just to please him, I went and looked. Our spare room is right under the roof, and I can remember when it was quite a pleasant little space, with a slanting ceiling and one small window, with dimpled glass. Now—well, if the door had opened inwards, we'd never have been able to open it. Just by standing in the doorway, I could see—one bow, unstrung; several arrows; a clutch of assorted swords, foils, épées, sabres, bayonets and knives—some naked, some in sheaths and some of those designed to be thrown; three silver-plated spurs on a shield—only Fred would want *three* spurs, and just following that line of thought could bring delirium—a model galleon; a butterfly trapped inside a block of perspex; fourteen feet of stock-whip in a tangle; a chest of drawers which had been converted into a cabinet of shelves simply by taking out the drawers and flooring the gaps—and this full to falling-out with reagent bottles of all sizes and colours.

A tottering stack of Mechanical Handyman's Weekly; and an empty gas-bottle, a fish bowl, an electric rifle, a pair of bicycle mud-guards, a green door from someone's back-yard, minus the top left panel and with a 'hand' dangling in a macabre and sinister way from the letter

box; a comptometer, partly dismantled; three plastic beakers drooped and distorted into weird shapes and part-full of a strange, off-white, furry fungus-like stuff—and more—and more. I shut the door, hurriedly.

“Just the same” I said, firmly. “It’s all got to be cleared out, by noon tomorrow” and then I went off to my work. I hadn’t the faintest idea where he was going to put it, but I have learned, over the years, that this is the way to deal with Fred. Which is where the flair come is.

He is what you could call a ‘lunatic’ inventor. He has no particular training or skill beyond that of a first-class fitter-mechanic, and left alone, would probably doodle his life away. It’s when the pressure is on that he comes up with this serendipitous flair for devising something, by feel and by intuition, which will achieve the desired result. I learned the trick of applying pressure by thinking in terms of an analogue with the computers which earn my bread and butter. You can sit in front of a computer and ask questions until you’re blue in the face and nothing will happen. But if you translate your problem into the right terms, and push it in the right way, the machinery lights up, and goes to work, and out comes the result.

Call it pressure, applied psychology, or whatever you like—it works. The only reason I can claim any credit, here, is because I have the job of translating back into sense some of the things Fred comes up with. At times they are well worth the trouble. One or two of the items that have resulted from his flair and my brain-sweat have turned out very well indeed. We are not, therefore, as poverty-stricken as the foregoing dialogue might suggest, but we do try to live to a budget. The computers run on a budget, too, with available time sold by the minute, so it was a matter of luck that we had some slack time that morning.

Mr. Rawlins, my chief, had a sheaf of stuff all ready for me, and a sour grin on his face. “The Ministry of Transport have the machine booked for the whole morning, to do this—” he handed me the data. “They want estimates of the number of vehicles there will be on the roads over the next ten years and the total at the

end of that time. Then an estimate of the total parking-space required to take care of said vehicles at the end of that period. A schoolboy with a slide-rule could work it out in half-an-hour, but that is the official mind, all over."

A frustrated men, Mr. Rawlins. He can't get over the fact that the lay mind, and especially the political lay mind, is slow to realise the vast potentials which lurk in the new giant computers. He went away into his own office, to brood, and I got to work on the machine. Ten minutes to put the material into programme form, three minutes for the machine to spit out the answer on tape, another ten minutes for me to type it up into plain English—and I could have done it in my head, almost. For all the good it would do the Minister, the tenth year parking space was just a shade less than the whole of the Greater London area.

As I do not own a car, nor ever intend to, because I can get into quite enough trouble on my own two feet, I wasn't worried. Not my problem. But I did have spare time, and a problem of my own, with the data in my pocket. For an hour or so I amused myself passing the data through the machine—and shaking my head at the answers. Then, as there was no reason why not, I went home. Fred was toying idly with bits and pieces from our spare tape-recorder, down in the cellar work-room.

"What—" I asked him, "—did you have in mind when you wound that coil, anyway?"

"Nothing special. Something I read in a book." He pushed his fingers through his ginger hair and grinned. "It said that a coil with a negative inductance would do strange things. So I had a go."

"Negative inductance, my foot!" I reached for a reference book to show him, "There's no such thing. You'd want wire with negative resistance, to start with, and even super-conductors don't achieve that—"

"I know" he admitted. "I looked it up. But I made coil just the same. And it does do queer things, you have to admit that!" He was absolutely right, there. We went to look at the awful thing. Just a breadboard hook-up, with a shiny copper-wire shape that looked like some-

thing a surrealist might have dreamed up in a bad moment, and assorted condensers and rectifiers here and there. A terminal at either end made it clearer—or you'd have been excused for not knowing where it began or ended. And I had played with this thing all last night, pretending to test it.

There was a neon indicator-bulb. I had begun with a one-and-a-half volt dry-cell, just to check continuity. The molten remains of that cell were in the waste-bin as a silent testimony to insanity. And the bulb had continued to glow for fifteen seconds after the circuit was broken. That was the start. It had also seemed like the end. That circuit would pass a volt-and-a-half D.C. with what seemed like a one-hundred-and-fifty percent gain. Which was nonsense. But it wouldn't pass anything higher, at all. I tried it with A.C. and D.C. up to the limit of our fuses—and they are pretty robust—with never a twich on my test-meter. It was just as if one poured juice into one end, and it didn't come out at the other. It just went somewhere else. Then we lost the micro-ammeter.

Or rather, Fred lost it. I had gone upstairs to put the kettle on. He had reasoned thus, if you can call it reasoning. Power goes in. Something happens, because the bulb lights up. Therefore there ought to be a field of some kind inside that coil. A micro-ammeter ought to detect it. So he had put the micro-ammeter inside the coil, and switched on. And it had disappeared. That was his story. He repeated it now, vehemently. I didn't believe it. Nor did I believe the figures I had extracted from the analogue machine at work. I showed him those.

"They are just plain, straightforward ridiculous" I told him. "This lot here is the only result which adds up, and to get that I had to put in a whole set of extra dimensions—"

I should never have said it like that, but it was too late. Extra dimensions mean one thing to a mathematician, and something quite different to almost anyone else. Certainly something different to Fred.

"That's it!" he said, excitedly. "That's where the meter went. Into the fourth dimension!"

"That will be the day. Fourth dimension, my foot. There's no such place, any more than there is a subconscious mind, or a coil with negative inductance. Fred, these are just mathematical abstractions, fictitious!"

"Talk!" he sneered. "Just talk. Why don't we try it out? If it went, it ought to come back. We just reverse things, that's all!"

So simple, to say. But that is Fred, in a nutshell. Simple and obvious, and insane. I watched him re-connect the terminals, and asked.

"What are you going to put in the place of the missing meter?" He didn't even bother to answer. He had a length of wire all ready to lay across that blasted coil. A dead short across four hundred volts D.C. I admit that I took a generous pace backwards as he threw the switch. The light flickered a bit, then came steady. But the meter was back, just where it had been, bang in the middle of the coil.

"There you are!" he said, in triumph, switching off. Of course I had nothing to say, and I managed to refrain from saying it. I watched him pick up the meter—which is more than I would have cared to do, frankly—and then *he* got a surprise. Because it fell apart in his hand. When we came to examine it, later, we found there wasn't a single nut, bolt, or screw in the thing anywhere. A very selective fourth dimension, indeed. But Fred had his mental teeth locked on the thing, now, and there was that look in his eye that warned me to leave him severely alone. He was thinking. I would have preferred to forget the whole thing.

I did, in fact, for that evening and night. Then, early Sunday morning, the phone rang for me, and I had to go along to I.C.L. and placate an irate Ministry man who was not satisfied with the results I had worked out for him. Sunday work is nothing unusual for us. Neither computers nor problems care what day of the week it is. But it was a bit of a strain on the man from the Ministry, and it showed. He had already tried his teeth on Mr. Rawlins before I got there. Now he tried them on me.

"This—" he said, tossing down my report, "—is not a solution. What on earth is the point of having these

expensive and complicated machines, if they can't produce better solutions than this?"

I was in no mood to be nice to him. "It's not a solution" I agreed, "Simply because you didn't give us a problem in the first place. You gave a set of figures and trends. The machine worked out the obvious results. That's what it's for. What you're looking for is something quite different. You want to know how you are going to park and garage several million vehicles within the London area at a given time. But you didn't ask that question—and even if you had, you wouldn't have accepted the answer."

"Indeed. Why not?"

"Because the answer is—you can't. What's more, you never will be able to. You ever hear of Parkinson's Law?"

"I am not a mathematician" he snapped, quite offensively. "I leave that kind of thing to people like you."

"Very well. Let my kind of people tell you something. People drive up to the city to work only if they believe they can find a place to park. Several thousands don't, because they know there isn't any space. So—as fast as you provide new parking spaces, so cars will flow into the city to fill them. You can't win."

He was quite nasty about it, but he went away after a while. Then I was free to go home again and begin clearing that room. With Fred lost to the mundane world in a fascinating problem, I knew I would have to do it. But I was wrong, for once.

"Come and see" he invited. He had done a wonderful job. I had not remembered the ceiling as pale blue, nor the walls a glowing green, nor could I identify the soft spongy stuff on the floor. But the room was quite empty, and clean, and there was a shaft of bright sunlight streaming in at the small window to make it look very pleasant.

"All is forgiven" I admitted, humbly. "You've really done wonders. Now all we have to do is assemble the bed and get the place homey."

Aunt Mabel arrived about five. She's rather well-off, and quite a nice person, not too stuck in the prim past,

so the evening wasn't an ordeal or anything like that. In fact it went off a lot better than I had dared to hope, because Fred kept himself well in the background. Not that he's unfit for polite society or anything, but any conversation he takes part in is likely to take off into wild and weird channels—and—well, she *is* my aunt, and well-off—and I'm in no position to sneer at the idea of a nice inheritance, some day.

Things began to go just a little off-centre about seven-thirty. Auntie had announced that she wanted to see the Black-and-White Minstrels, on BBC, and then she would go to bed, so as to be up bright and early in the morning. I like that show, too, so I switched and sat back. I had something tickling the back of my mind, but I couldn't put a finger on it, so watching T.V. was a way of shifting attention to let it come up, if it was going to. If you know the show at all, you'll know that it's just the kind of thing to encourage the subconscious; the Minstrels in black-face and Christie costumes, the Toppers showing their paces, plenty of movement, and all the old standards of yesterday very well sung, and you just sit back and disengage the brain.

After I'd corrected a slight tendency for the picture to tear across, I sat back—and then, after a minute or two, I had to sit forward again. Because this show was different. Even Aunt Mabel noticed it.

"I don't recognise any of the songs, this time" she said, "and they have done something different with the costumes, haven't they?"

They had indeed. For a change, the girls were black-face and the men were in revealing tights. Very revealing. I half-expected Auntie to complain, but she seemed to be enjoying it. I hope I'm as broad-minded as most, but some of the poses and dances weren't just near the knuckle, they were half-way up your arm. Too, the cameras kept giving us a shot of the orchestra, and they were the queerest crowd I have ever seen outside of a science-fiction convention. However, as there was no complaint from the elderly relative, I kept quiet until it was over.

"That was very good" she commented, getting up.

"The best I've seen. Quite a change from watching silly girls showing their legs. Of course, I didn't understand a word they were saying, but then I never do."

"It wasn't until after she'd gone to bed that it sunk in—that I hadn't understood a word either. The next programme, which should have been a Perry Mason, was different, too. So different that I went and found Fred and had him come and watch. I won't give you the whole scenario, although I'm not likely to forget any of it myself. The chief characters, if you can call them that, were tall skinny things with feathers instead of hair, and fangs, and nictitating eyes — and vaguely humanoid.

"Like something out of the Twilight Zone" Fred decided, and went to study the programmes in the book, but this was Channel One, and nothing like this was supposed to be showing. Channel Nine had a programme that was even worse. This time the long feathery things were conducting what looked like an extermination programme on some other things that were a lot like people, only naked and primitive, in a jungle like no jungle I ever saw, on film or anything else. We tried UHF and got just noise and no picture.

"All right!" I said, sternly. "Let's have it. What have you been up to, eh?"

"Me?" he was indignant. He always is, and I was not amused.

"You!" I said. "Whenever something happens which ought not to, I look at you—and I'm always right. What have you done, this time?" Then, before he could answer, I had it. That little mental itch suddenly bloomed. "That room" I breathed. "You cleared it—and the sun was shining in the window at noon today—but that window faces North! Fred—what—?"

"It was the coil" he admitted. "An analogue of it, anyway. I thought that if a little one could move a meter into the fourth dimension, a big one ought to be able to move the junk out of that room. So I shinned out on to the roof, laid out a bigger one to cover the room, hooked it up and switched on, and the junk went away. You saw it. It worked."

I suppose I ought to have said something severe and critical, but I couldn't think of anything to cover such a situation. And the more I waited, the more it came to me that he hadn't done anything so very dreadful—yet. In fact he might have done something rather good, in a way.

"This" I told him, "ties in with something at work. The problem of finding garage space. If it works the way you think it does—"

He was ahead of me, in a moment. "Wrap a coil around your garage, transfer the contents to the fourth dimension and repeat — we'll make our fortunes, this time."

I've heard *that* one before. "Hang on a bit" I cautioned. "We need a test or two, first. Remember the way that meter came back? Remember the *way* you made it return?"

"But I've done all that" he protested. "When I rigged that coil assembly I also rigged a reverse hook-up. And I shot that junk in and out of that room a dozen times, just to see. It was all right. There must have been something wrong with that meter in the first place."

I didn't like it, but I had to accept it. And we had to leave it, in any case, because Aunt Mabel was in the room, and asleep by this time. So we went back and watched TV, and saw some of the weirdest programmes I have ever seen. The coil was doing this, too, of course. But saying that, pointing out that our aerial was up there on the roof just by the coil, and that *it* was doing *this*—was saying nothing at all. Calling it freak reception didn't help any, either. Those programmes just did not make sense, nor were they very pleasant. Fred, as always, was trying to work out some way of turning this angle to profit, also.

"If only we could get some of this stuff on film, or tape" he said, "we could make a killing with the art-film crowd. It's sensational!"

He was quite right there, but he didn't qualify the sensations he meant. Some of the things the feathered and fanged people did for fun were enough to bring goosepimples to my back. I know I didn't draw an easy

breath until after Aunt Mabel had departed, safe and sound, in the morning. That was about eight-thirty. We fell on that room like mad people, clearing out the bed and furnishing and making it just as it had been. Then Fred threw the switch. He'd installed it in the skirting board a yard or two down the passage. There was a kind of soundless rumble, and then we went back, threw the door open—and stared.

The bow had been strung, backwards. That was the first thing I noticed. Then I saw the swords and bayonets had been bent and twisted into weird shapes. The bottles of chemicals had gone, all of them. So had the pile of copies of Handyman. The fish-bowl had been bent into a fabulous shape, and closed tight, with the galleon and the perspex butterfly inside. Fred picked up this last item with a look of painful disbelief.

“That’s not possible” he complained. “You can’t shape glass without heat—but the galleon and the perspex are unhurt. Can’t be done!”

“From you” I said, “that’s rich. It has happened. And just look at this.” I stooped to tap the comptometer, which was now fully assembled once more. “Some fourth dimension, that puts broken-down machinery back together again.” I ran a few test calculations on it, just to see, and added. “And it works, what’s more. As I remember, there was quite a bit of it missing, wasn’t there?”

By a sort of mutual understanding, we went out of the room and shut the door. I was thinking hard about the weird TV programmes. Fred was in a different mood altogether. He went back to the switch.

“Look” he said, “suppose we switch it to and fro a bit—it might come out right by itself. Perhaps it’s shifted in time or something. I mean, who knows, about the fourth dimension?” and he had flipped the switch before I could stop him. There was that shudder again. He returned to the door, and I looked over his shoulder as he opened it.

We had our sponge-floored room with the blue ceiling and green walls, just as before, but this time, standing there right in the middle and staring at us was a long,

skinny, feathered thing with cat's eyes. Fred slammed the door shut faster than I have seen him move in a long time, and put his back to it. His face was a grey-green colour. For one very long second I stared at him. Then I saw the door rattle and jerk, as something tried to get out. And I moved, in a kind of frantic blur, to the switch.

"What was it?" Fred whispered, letting himself slide to a sitting position against the door. "What the hell was it?"

"Parallel universes" I told him, from my knees and picking splinters out of my fingers. "We stole a room from their house. We were getting their TV programmes. They've been trying to make sense out of your junk."

We both thought back over those programmes, and felt sick as we remembered what sort of treatment the feather and fang chaps were meting out to the vaguely human ones. You can call us cowards, if you like, but we decided, there and then, to forget all about that coil. I do not want to meet those people, not even to find out how they got that galleon into the fish bowl—nor how they made a comptometer work with several of the parts missing. And I gave up the parking-space notion without a pang. Can you imagine what they would do to our cars?

—JOHN RACKHAM

Here, rather belatedly, is a tribute to the creator and former editor of this magazine—the man who made a literature single-handed.

E. J. CARNELL - - A QUICK LOOK

by Harry Harrison

If the Things from outer space landed in Regent's Park tomorrow, there is no doubt that the authorities would turn first to Edward John Carnell for advice on how to handle the situation.

I firmly believe this to be true: he has not been called the Old Monopolist for nothing. For years now he has been carrying on the most complicated career imaginable, a polydactyl mastermind who has a finger in every science-fictional pie. It is a lucky thing for us all that he has been the benevolent despot, managing to be impartial while at the same time acting as literary agent, art agent, magazine editor, book editor, anthologist, book club selector, publisher's representative . . . my powers of expression fail me, as does my memory. The result of this has been that whenever someone such as a publisher, movie producer or television director has made a request for science-fictional information or aid anywhere in the British Isles, the request has sooner or later been dropped onto the O.M.'s desk.

It is important to remember—if you doubt the benevolent part—that "Ted" Carnell started life as an sf fan and has remained true to that dedicated calling ever since. He likes sf and this affection has always been his prime motivation; he has had monopoly thrust upon

him. In the primitive days of 1946 when NEW WORLDS was first founded—and again in 1952 when it was re-founded—there were no other British sf magazines nor editors nor agents who handled this specialized material: Ted had to take them on one by one for himself. Only dedication could have motivated him to assume all this responsibility, while at the same time editing NEW WORLDS and SCIENCE-FANTASY, through all the black years of audience indifference into the present sunlight of acceptance. It cheers me to see that other editors are now at work on these journals, I was afraid that the O.M. would explode from overwork. He still has entirely too much to do, but apparently that is the only way that he can operate.

For one thing, he appears to have gained some sort of global control of sf. For a long time he has had northern Europe within his empire, channeling British and American sf to the markets there, and now he has appropriated Spain, Portugal and Japan, and is introducing them to the glories of science fiction. All of this is a very good thing—remember the benevolency—and the only ones with cause to grumble are shoestring foreign publishers, since he insists always on a fair price for the authors he handles. But agenting is not all, he still keeps his hand in the creative pool as editor of NEW WRITINGS IN S-F, a forthcoming series of books that will use original stories and hopefully help to free sf from some of the rusty shackles of magazine taboos.

The man who carries these many portfolios is a dedicated Londoner, born in Plumstead in 1912 he still makes his home there. He sports a natty moustache and a fine ruddy complexion that only years of exposure to the rigours of the English climate—both indoors and out—can produce. I have many times tucked my legs under the family table and consumed the immense and satisfying teas his wife Irene uncomplainingly produces for all the flotsam of science fiction that wash up on the Carnell doorstep. After tea, and with a little prodding, the O.M. will show some of the films he has made of historical science-fictional gatherings and one can sip a drink and wallow in nostalgia. The fire crackles in

the grate and forgotten faces are recalled with enthusiasm and amusement. I think, perhaps, this is the secret of Ted Carnell's success and his ability to play fair to all in his many rôles. He *enjoys* science fiction and, since he has made it his life's work, he feels content with every passing day.

His is an enviable position.

—HARRY HARRISON.

The two "Anita" stories in our last issue were so popular that we confidently present—

THE CHARM

by Keith Roberts

Something went 'chuzz-clunk' and Anita felt shooting pains almost everywhere at once. She sat down with a thump and when she could look up she saw she was encircled by a thin chain that had apparently dropped from the oak beneath which she had been walking. She reached toward the chain then snatched her hand back hastily. The links lay in the grass looking harmless enough but she could not touch them. She tried to get up but her legs were too wobbly. She felt terrible; she had never been completely surrounded by iron before.

In the middle of the circle the discomfort was slightly less. Anita wriggled to the focus, turning over in her mind the various spells that might ease her condition. A gentleman rose from behind some nearby bushes. He was rubbing his hands with quite unnecessary satisfaction and smiling genially. He approached the chain and nodded politely.

"Good afternoon to you."

Anita regarded him coldly. "Did you do this?"

"I did. Extremely effective, isn't it? I always find it difficult to believe myself." The stranger's voice was deep and offensively jovial.

Anita grimaced, tried to get up again and thought better of it. "What is it? What's happened to me?"

"It's a witch trap" said the gentleman, circling carefully. Anita felt a quick twinge of fear.

"What did you say?"

"You heard me well enough I think."

"Well I'm . . . I'm not a witch. I was just out for

a walk . . . ”

“Very well then; step over the chain and carry on.”

Anita’s fear turned to rage. She hissed like a kettle, rolling her lips back from her teeth, but the gentleman did not seem unduly depressed. “I can detect witches” he said. “Made a study of them.” He reached into a haversack he was carrying and brought out a small instrument. “See?”

“What’s . . . what’s that?”

“Something I made. It works rather well. Small enough to slip into the pocket if necessary; it’ll pick up a witch from at least a mile. Like a sort of psychic scintillometer. I’ve been watching you for days, that’s why I knew you came this way.”

“How does it work?” Anita was playing for time.

“That would be telling . . . now, I want you to do something for me.”

“Open the chain then, and we’ll talk.”

The gentleman laughed. He had a nice laugh, deep and booming. As a matter of fact he was rather nice altogether, he had blue eyes and dimples, he was bearded and blonde and very large without being fat. But this was a crisis . . .

“*Open the chain!*”

“No” said the gentleman composedly. “Not until we’ve reached an agreement.”

“But it’s *hurting* . . . ”

“I expect it is. Witches can’t stand iron. I want you to help me before I let you out. Well at least, I want your promise. Witches’ honour of course, so you can’t recant.”

Anita was beginning to feel hot behind the ears with fury. This man knew too much to live. The curse was almost complete but she held it back, applying the finishing touches. The things it would do to him were almost beyond belief . . . Anita said “I’ll promise anything within reason as long as I can get out of this thing . . . ”

“Ah, that’s better. Now, this is the proposition. After I’ve let you out I want you to come over to—”

“*Yahh!*”

Anita half rose, crouching on her haunches, and her eyes went mad and burned blue like lightning. One hand shot out like a claw and sparks crackled toward her persecutor. "May you—"

There was a flash and a roar. The rebound knocked Anita flat. She sat up feeling more dazed than ever. The gentleman was sitting facing her across the chain. He was quite composed but his face was paler than before. His lips were set in a line and there was a red anger-spot on each cheekbone. He said "You shouldn't have done that. It was deceitful, I expected better of you . . . if you want a fight you can have one but I must warn you you're in a very bad position."

Anita put her head in her hands. The gentleman relented a little. "You're very lovely but rather inexperienced. A seasoned witch would never have tried a thing like that across iron . . . please agree quickly and I can let you out. I don't like having to hurt you."

"No . . ."

The gentleman sighed. "Then I'm afraid I shall have to take the offensive. I can't let you go without an oath, it would be far too dangerous . . . I'm Sir John Carpenter by the way. You've probably heard of me."

"Haven't . . ."

In fact she had. He was extremely famous and wrote books about witchcraft. Anita swallowed. She was in worse trouble than she had thought. She tried to work a crafty spell under the chain and had to stop because the ground buzzed so uncomfortably. Sir John got up, stepped back a few paces and consulted a book he had taken from the haversack. He began to intone. The words were only a mumble but Anita knew they were a spell. He finished on a higher note, made a dramatic flourish—sure sign of an amateur—and Anita flinched. She felt something although she was not sure what. Sir John put his hands on his hips. "Well then, I can pass material inside the chain quite readily you see . . . what do you think of that one?"

Anita said cautiously "You haven't done anything."

He shook his head. "You just keep looking."

She stared. Everything seemed the same. The air was

warm, a bird sang overhead, the sun shone brightly . . . she whipped round and screamed. She had no shadow.

"No" said Sir John grimly. "And no reflection either, as you'll find when you get home. Everyone will know you for what you are now."

Anita's heart banged. "But I must have a shadow. Otherwise I can't go anywhere."

"Precisely."

"An' . . . an' a reflection. I can't do my hair any more . . ." She wailed, beginning to realize the difficulties of a half-life.

"I expect you'll make out. The spells aren't reversible of course, except by me . . . they were done over the chain."

"Gran will beat me."

"That's your problem."

Anita's lower lip began to tremble. "I want my shadow. I shall be lonely . . . I loved it, it used to do errands for me . . ."

Sir John folded his arms. "You're not going to get round me like that. I've been deeply upset. You tried to disintegrate me; there was no excuse for that, you weren't being badly hurt at all. I don't know what will mollify me now. Remember, I know witches extremely well . . ."

"Surely there's *something* I can do . . ."

Sir John put his chin in his hand and brooded at her. Then his eyes started to twinkle. He leaned over the chain and whispered softly. Anita listened frowning, then her face cleared. "Oh, is *that* all . . . Why ever didn't you say before?"

"There are other things. That will do for a start."

Anita began to smile. It was the first pleasant expression she'd used since the trap had sprung. Sir John was really very sweet . . . She said "Witches' honour" with no hesitation at all. Sir John bowed formally and un-snapped the chain. She fled through the opening gratefully, her shadow dancing at her heels.

* * *

Anita lay in bed face down, smouldering a little and listening to the birds. After a time she rolled over lazily. The windows were tall and flanked by brocade curtains. The glazing-bars cut the blue of the sky very prettily and outside could be seen the twinkling tops of the trees in the drive. Sir John really had a lovely house. Soon she supposed she would have to get up and go home, but not for a while . . . she began to doze pleasantly.

Sir John called up the stairs. "Come on, get moving. Breakfast's in the morning room. When you come through the hall mind the library, there are Bibles there."

"Mmmmmm . . ."

"Come on, I want to talk to you. You've only done the first part of what you promised, the rest's more fun."

"Mmm . . . never . . ."

"Oh . . . well hurry up anyway."

Anita felt tired and heavy. Quite unable to move. She fashioned a thought and sent it floating downstairs. It asked coyly 'Hair of the dog?' It finished with a large question mark prettily made out of hearts and inter-lapping ribbons. Sir John ignored it. He must be busy.

The clock on the mantel did say ten thirty. She would have to move . . . She got up regretfully, leaned on the dressing table for a yawning fit and began to hunt for her clothes. She found a little dressing gown; it was hip-length and belted like a white furry tunic. She fell in love with it and put it on. In the kitchen she was frightened by a self-ejecting toaster and fled to Sir John for comfort but he merely slapped her and sent her back upstairs to bathe and dress. He was evidently very pre-occupied indeed . . .

Some of the tableware was so nice Anita actually carried it through to the kitchen in her hands. She could levitate anything of course but her cornering was lousy. . . . She went back to the morning room leaving the dishes churning busily as they washed themselves. Sir John showed her an amulet. It was large and wonderfully coloured and it had a thin gold chain. Anita wanted it immediately, it would make a beautiful dally . . . She grabbed for it but Sir John twitched it out of reach. "Steady m' dear, it's very precious. You can look if you

hold it carefully."

Anita took it, gripping it by the chain and cupping her other hand round it protectingly. The charm was of ivory, most delicately worked. It was ovoid and made like a little cage. Inside were figures. They seemed to be set with jewels of some sort for they sent out blue glitters in the sunlight. It was hard to see them clearly; Anita tried to make out who they represented and what they were doing but it was impossible to tell, they were too fuzzy and vague. She frowned and looked at Sir John. "What is it?"

His face fell a little. "I was hoping you'd know. It's a magic amulet of some sort and it came from Thibet. That's all I can tell you about it. I want to find out what it does."

Anita nodded. "I know it's magic, I can feel it . . . but I don't know what it's for, I've never seen one like it. I bet my Granny would know. She's terribly good with this sort of thing."

"You can take it and show her if you promise to bring it back."

"Oh I will . . ."

"And afterwards I want you to help me make it work. I know a few spells but nothing very complex."

"Why do you want it to work?"

"I want to write another book." Sir John waved a hand at a library shelf. "I wrote all these. I write books on magic. Nobody believes them of course but they sell like hot cakes. They're all true although that's beside the point."

Anita nodded. There were many books here as well as in the study. Some of them were very old; she could feel the evil spilling out through their backs. She smiled slowly, holding the amulet. "I think you're very clever. You can do so many things . . ."

Sir John twirled his moustache, far from displeased. "Yes, well . . . we won't go into that now . . . Thing is, will you help me?"

"Oh yes. No, wait a minute . . ." Anita's mind ticked. "You have to give presents you know. It's customary . . . I want to have some presents first."

"You shall have them, within reason of course. What do you want?"

"Well . . . it's my birthday next week, I want a positively enormous card with hearts on it and you can write something nice inside. You know, something full of double meanings."

Sir John chuckled. "That's easy enough . . . what else?"

"A chunky sweater with a cowl collar and threequarter sleeves, in a sort of goldy-brown."

"Alright, I think I can do that."

"An' a white dress with a circular skirt, permanently pleated, sleeveless and with a scoop neckline—women's size—and—"

"Careful, dark thing. You might kill the golden goose."

"Only one more" said Anita, eyes big.

"Go on then."

Anita's voice was a whisper. "An' . . . an' a fly in amber, to look at at night when it's raining . . ."

Sir John smiled. He crossed the room to a large writing desk, rummaged in a drawer. He said "Is this what you mean?" He dropped something into her lap.

Anita gasped and held the little ball to the light. The thing inside winked, his eyes flashing fire. The sparks were ten million years old.

"Oh Sir John, thank you . . ."

Sir John ruffled her hair. "Go on then, don't forget your toothpaste in the bathroom . . . You can come back and see me when you've found out what the amulet does. Be careful with it." Anita dithered, then tucked the amber into her bra for safe keeping. She fled, clutching the charm.

* * *

"Guz back" said Granny Thompson, prodding the winking jewel with her finger. "Or forrard, whichever soots. Dunt mek no odds in the long run."

"Back where, Gran?"

"In Time, o' course . . . wheer d'yer git it?" Her Granny looked suspicious.

"Off a man."

"Wot man?"

Anita could be very annoying. She picked up the dally and began to swing it. Reflections from it danced round the room like little blue searchlight beams. "Just a man."

"'Oo *were* it? Yer dunt git things like that orf any Tom Dick or 'arry" . . .

Anita raised her nose a trifle. "Very well then, he was called Sir John Carpenter."

Her Granny screwed up her face oddly. "Ho, was 'e? Hoity-toity hen't in it, is it? 'Horf Sir John Carpenter' she says. An' I needn't arsk 'ow . . . Comin' yer airs and graces . . . earned that on yer *back*, didn't yer . . ."

"Gran, there's no need to be crude . . ."

Granny Thompson snatched the amulet, quick as a snake. "Well yer kent *keep* it. I'll look after it till yer got more *sense* . . ."

"But Gran you can't; it's his, it was only lent. I promised to take it back . . ."

Her Granny softened a little. "Orlright then, dunt git her 'air orf . . . but I'll tek it down a bit fust, it's too *sharp* as it is, it'll 'ackle too much . . ." She dropped the charm into a small lead-lined pot she kept on the side-board. Anita had always thought of it as a tobacco jar. "Yer kin 'ave it come *Toosday*" said Granny Thompson. "It'll 'ave ter *soak*."

* * *

Anita lay with her head against Sir John's chest and let him stroke her hair. He said "Anita, what does the amulet do?"

"Mmmm . . . it's a Time Charm. It was put in a prayer wheel in a stream . . . it was there a hundred years and every revolution made it stronger . . . tell me about myself again."

"Not now . . . can you make it work for me?"

"Start at my head" said Anita drowsily, "And work down to my toes . . . and don't forget the dimples on my bottom this time, they're one of my best features."

"Anita, can you make it work?"

"Oh . . . tomorrow. Granny gave me a spell . . . she did something to it so it would be easier to manage."

"I hope she didn't put it out."

"It's still alive" said Anita, "I can hear it singing . . . now *tell me* . . ."

"Allright. Well, your hair is like the primal darkness, because that was brown and thick . . . and when the lights come on it, they are the first stars . . ."

Anita wriggled luxuriously. She could stand this almost indefinitely.

* * *

Anita wandered across a field with the charm round her neck. She was leading a seal-point Siamese on a tinkling least. "I let him come" she explained to Sir John. "He knows about things like this." The Siamese howled, looking at Anita with eyes like bits of deranged sky. She stopped under a spreading oak. "I think here . . . it's as good a place as we'll find."

"Doesn't the place matter?"

"I don't think so. Gran would have said . . . The time's important though, we shall have to start at noon."

"GMT?"

"I suppose so . . . what's the time now?"

"Two minutes to go."

"Gosh, we shall have to hurry." Anita unclipped the collar from the Familiar. "Go on, Winijou . . . shoo, it might be dangerous." The animal withdrew to a bush and began inspecting the ground for mouseholes. Anita bit her lip and thought for a moment. Then she took the charm and held it out at arms length. "Scale-of-dragon-tooth - of - wolf - witches - mummy - maw - and - gulf - of-the-ravin'd-salt-sea-shark . . . That's the catalyst" she explained. She could feel the charm twitching, wanting to be set down. Her palms were sweaty. This was the biggest spell she'd ever handled alone, it was a heavy responsibility. Sir John looked anxious. "I hope we don't get knocked into another probability or something stupid like that."

"We shall be allright. Gran saw to it. Hold hands though . . . just for luck" she explained winningly.

He looked at his watch, twining his free hand in hers. "One minute to go."

"You'll have to help me keep time . . . it's a sort of geometric progression, the speed keeps on going up. I shall want the minutes read off."

"Right then. Forty-five seconds."

"Just time to say I love the woolly" said Anita a little breathlessly. She rubbed her cheek against her shoulder.

"The dress is on its way . . ."

"Shh. Get ready."

Winijou stopped moving and began to growl, his eyes on Anita.

"Noon . . ."

Anita started off at the gallop hoping she would remember the intricacies of the language. 'Om mane padme hum' figured prominently, reversed of course each time. The charm became so heavy it dragged her wrist down. As the little cage touched the grass it began to spin; the chain whirled out, became a flickering circle of light.

"Gosh, don't put your hand near. It's going like a propellor."

Winijou glared; suddenly there was a mouse in his mouth. The little animal's tail rotated in stiff arcs beside his face.

"One minute . . ."

Anita speeded up, feeling she was going to burst for lack of breath. At two minutes Winijou vanished as if somebody had switched him off, and at three they were surrounded by a wide silver bubble through which they could see the field outside. The charm began to whine. The note rose into supersonics and the thing continued to speed up. At four minutes Anita collapsed with a gasp and sat thankfully while air whooped into her lungs. Sir John caught her arm.

"Look!"

Over their heads the tree was shrinking visibly. They watched it grow to a sapling, then a twig. It vanished, plop. Anita gasped.

The charm was invisible now except as a blur. She

could feel the wind from it lifting her hair. Sir John looked at it anxiously. "I hope it doesn't decide to shift, it could do a devil of a lot of damage."

"I think it's allright. It knows what it's doing, it wanted to be set down . . . gosh look, another tree . . ." The thing must have sprung from dust and levered itself upright but that process was too quick to detect. They saw it vanish into the ground like a turned-off fountain and there was another and another, like green fireworks against the sky. Day and night were already changing too rapidly to be noticed though the sun was making the appropriate fizzing circle. Anita was glad of that; she had read her Wells.

"Can we slow down at all?"

"I don't know. We might . . ."

The amulet wobbled; the chain dropped down and flicked the grass. A man jerked across the field in front of them. He wore a long hat like an old-fashioned night-cap and he carried a basket from which he was casting grain with quick sweeps of his arm. Around him the old furrows on the hills were alive again, the long strips of growing crops looked like allotments. Anita clapped her hands. "This is terrific . . . where are we?"

"The Middle Ages somewhere. Look, the old three field system . . . go on."

The amulet snarled with power. Anita was getting the trick of the thing nicely now. The acceleration startled them both; when they next stopped it was night time. A quick touch on the throttle brought the sun up . . .

"Oh, *look!*"

The soldiers came tramping across the field, arms swinging together. The Eagles nodded at the head of the column, somewhere a drum was beating. The sun winked on brass and polished leather. Short kilts swung, disclosing burly brown knees; the sandals spurned the grass, the great shields gleamed . . .

"They're *fabulous!*" Anita sprang to the side of the bubble. "Look at that one in front, he's their centurion or something . . . Oh, he's marvellous . . . yoo-hoo . . ." She began to wave and shout but the soldier marched past stolidly, eyes ahead. The column began to recede in the distance. Anita beat the sides of the bubble till

she bruised her fists but her Granny had worked well, the thing was like toughened steel.

The next time they stopped there was nothing. The Romans had gone into the future. They went on again, and again.

Nothing . . .

Nothing . . .

There were men, old and ragged, with long hair and beards that blew in the wind. They had axes and knives and as they walked they glared round them warily like animals. The women trudged after, great bundly things with babies humped on their backs.

"Don't like them." Anita turned her nose up. "The men are alright but women have come a long way."

"Steatopygous" said Sir John.

"I don't care, I still don't like them."

Somewhere a man was fashioning the Venus of Willendorf.

"Go on . . ."

The ice came. Tumbling and booming, great tongues and rivers of it, miles high. Trees and shrubs and hills sprang upright as it retreated. Then it was a blue blink on the horizon and the roaring stopped. Anita shuddered. "Don't like it . . ."

"You mustn't mind. It'll come again. Go on . . ."

A temperate land. A placid lake in the distance. Chubby horses with long manes, browsing.

"Go on. A long time this time . . ."

There was a rank smell like a greenhouse. Trees shooting up high as cathedral arches. Their stems looked pulpy and soft and their branches stuck out like diagrams. There was water everywhere, the bubble seemed to float. Anita brushed the trees away with a burst of speed and there were galumphing noises. Herds of Things crossed the horizon. Something flicked past the sun and there was a pterodactyl with a head like a bright nightmare, diving. It brushed overhead leaving a smell like a room-full of old umbrellas. Something was fighting in the swamp. An animal had been wounded. It was tearing great red carpets of skin from its own back and there were fish-things round it, jaws cracking like gunshots.

They hurried on . . ."

"Well I *like* the Cambrian" said Anita. "It's peaceful." They were under the sea now, the surface twinkling overhead. Trilobites moved slowly like outsize woodlice.

"We ought to go back now. There's so much to see on the way."

"No!"

"It isn't wise . . ."

Anita started the charm again. "I want to see the Prime Creation. I want to see if the Void *was* brown."

"Be careful, Anita. You might see God . . ."

"Oh!" She strained at the jewel. Then she started to pant. "John, it won't stop!"

"It must do . . ."

"It won't, it's run away with itself . . ."

"Well, try. Try hard . . ."

The humming filled the sphere. Anita fell back, face streaming sweat. "It's no use. It wasn't supposed to do that . . ."

Sir John put his arm round her. "Don't worry, you couldn't help it. Look, look at the stars."

"They're on all the time . . ."

"No, they've gone again now. Volcanoes . . . we're getting near it."

"Look at the hills . . ." They were leaping up and down, quivering. It was like a picture of a piece of machinery moving almost too fast to see. Everything began to shake. There was fire, for centuries. Then darkness . . .

"It *was* brown." Anita's voice sounded thin, the only thing in existence. "Look, it's just my colour . . ."

"There's nothing any more" said Sir John, sitting back. "Just brownness and peace, for ever."

The charm sang steadily.

Anita cowered. "There's still God . . . but my Prince hasn't fallen from Heaven. Nobody wants me now . . ."

"There aren't any planets . . ."

The sky cleared and became blue. The sun was back, fizzing round. They stared in amazement. "Where are we . . .?"

"Look." Sir John pointed. There were buildings. They were of no colour; the light seemed to dance on them and shift, as if they were made from butterflies' wings. Then fire—flick—buildings—fire—flick—flick—

"It was another world" said Sir John, awed. "Before everything . . . there can't have been another world."

The buildings reduced themselves, vanished like bright candles sucked into the ground. There were others but they were whiter and lower. Then more. The charm droned, throwing out golden splashes of light. The cities vanished and a tide of green flowed back. Trees flickered up and down. Anita put her hand to her throat. "It's just like now. I mean, it's just like now used to be . . ."

"But we're trillions of years back. Before there was an earth."

Anita wailed. "The charm. I can't hold it . . ." The little egg wobbled again; the lace touched the grass; the amulet rolled over, turned in an arc and lay still. Anita put out her hand, hesitated then picked it up. Her voice was like wind in grass. "It's gone. Burned out. John, what shall we do . . ."

Above them, the oak became.

Winijou howled. Anita turned startled and the cat was watching her with his impossible eyes. In his mouth the tail of the mouse still flicked, more slowly than before. Sir John got up. He said. "It's alright. It's just your cat."

"But it can't be. It can't be Winijou, we're all those years away from him."

Sir John put his hand under her elbow. "That's Winijou. And just over there's your house. And just over there, mine. Nothing's changed." He began to walk away.

Anita tagged after him, not comprehending. When she caught up with him he was muttering to himself. "So one day we shall find a way. Doomsday. We shall reduce the earth to basic slag, to the igneous rocks. It can't be. Yet it will . . ." He looked at Anita as though seeing her for the first time. He said "I'm glad you liked your sweater my dear. It looks well on you. Still, almost anything would."

Anita tucked her hand in his arm, craning to see into his face and understand him. The charm hung from her wrist but it was dead and dried, she had forgotten it. "We shall destroy the world" said Sir John, eyes on the ground. "So that there can be another, and another. As there have been in the past."

"But this is the past."

"And the present, and the future. All possible futures." He shook his head. "I can't write this. I don't think I can write anything any more."

Anita walked silently, frowning and scuffing at daisy heads with her shoes.

Winijou watched her go. After a time he stopped growling and laid the wet mouse on the grass. He put his paw on it softly, talons spread. He flensed them into it and watched the life of the little creature flare and go black.

* * *

"I *tole* yer" said Granny Thompson. "Tole yer it wadn't wuth the bother. "Future an' past, I said to yer, there ent no diff'rence. It dunt mek no odds."

Anita put her hands to her temples. "I feel as if I've been on a great long bus ride. Gran, are you the same . . . I mean, I am in a different world . . . I mean . . . oh I don't know what I mean . . ."

Her Granny chuckled grimly. "I'm *allus* the same . . . same as you, same as *'im*." She wagged a horny thumb at the window and Winijou, crouched outside on the sill, drew his claws excruciatingly across the glass and licked his mouth slowly.

"But Gran is there a beginning, or an end . . ."

"Or does it all *jine up*" said the old lady, wonderingly, her eyes bright with mysteries. "Like a circle . . . nothing in the middle but a gret 'oller 'ole . . ." She saw the amulet still dangling from Anita's wrist. "Well, yer kin chuck *that* uvver the 'edge any'ow, *that's* served it's turn."

Anita lifted the little dead thing curiously, looking at the figures inside. They seemed clearer now. She held it

to the window, turned it so the light caught it. She gasped, and flung it away from her. It dropped and rolled back across the floor to her feet. The people, she could see them now, herself in her new cowl-necked sweater and Sir John, tiny and laughing. They were trapped hand in hand in an ivory cage, the bars the colour of a rainy sky . . .

Anita went to Sir John's house a week later to thank him for the dress but the place was closed up and deserted. She never saw him again. She threw the charm into the Fyne-brook. She had thought it was dead, but the steam filled half a meadow.

—KEITH ROBERTS.

The imminent danger to sanity and decency which modern advertising and promotion schemes present is a well-thumbed fantasy theme. In this story Harry "Deathworld" Harrison shows how a top professional can breathe life into a cliché.

NOT ME, NOT AMOS CABOT !

by Harry Harrison

The morning mail had arrived while Amos Cabot was out shopping and had been thrown onto the rickety table in the front hall. He poked through it even though he knew there would be nothing for him: this wasn't the right day. On the 13th his social security check came and on the 24th the union check; there never was anything else except for a diminishing number of cards every Christmas. Nothing, he knew it. A large blue envelope was propped against the mirror but he couldn't make out the name, damn that skinflint Mrs. Peavey and her 2 watt bulbs. He bent over and blinked at it—then blinked again. By God, it was for him, and no mistake! Felt like a thick magazine or a catalog: he wondered what it could possibly be and who might have sent it to him. Clutching it to his chest with a knobby and liver-spotted hand he began the long drag up the three flights of stairs to his room. He dropped his string bag with the two cans of beans and the loaf of day-old white bread onto the drainboard and sat down heavily in his chair by the window. Unsealing the envelope he saw that it was a magazine, a thick glossy one with a black cover. He slid it out onto his lap and stared at it with horrified eyes.

HEREAFTER the title read in black prickly gothic letters against the field of greenish-grey, and underneath it was subtitled THE MAGAZINE OF PREPAREDNESS. The rest of the cover was black, solid midnight

black, except for an inset photograph shaped like a tombstone that had a cheerful view of a cemetery filled with flower blossoms, ranked headstones and brooding mausoleums. Was this all a very bad joke? It didn't seem so as Amos flipped through the pages, catching quick glances of caskets, coffins, cemetery plots and urns of mortal ashes. With a grunt of disgust he threw the magazine onto the table and as he did so a letter fell out and drifted to the floor. It was addressed to him, on the magazine's stationery; there was no mistake.

My dearest Sir:

Welcome to the contented family of happy readers of HEREFTER—The Magazine of Preparedness that smooths the road ahead. You, who are about to die, we salute you! A long, happy life lies behind you and ahead the Gates of Eternity are swinging open to welcome you, to return you to the bosom of your loved-ones long since passed on. Now, at this friendly final hour, we stand behind you ready to help you on your way. Have you settled your will? Bet you've been remiss—but that's no problem now! Just turn to page 109 and read the inspirational article WHERE THERE'S A WILL and learn all there is to know. And then, on page 114, you'll find a full-size, fold-out will that can be torn out along the handy perforations. Just fill in the few blanks, sign your name and have your local notary public (he's usually in the stationery store!) witness the signature. Don't delay! And have you considered cremation? There is a wonderfully inspirational message from Dr. Phillip Musgrove of The Little Church Around the Corner from the Crematorium on page . . .

Amos picked up the magazine with shaking hands and threw it the length of the room, feeling slightly better when it tore in two.

"What do you mean I'm going to die—what do you say that for?" he shouted, then lowered his voice as Antonelli next door hammered on the wall. "What's the idea of sending a filthy thing like that to a person? What's the idea?"

What was the idea? He picked the two halves of the magazine up and smoothed them out on the table. It was all too good-looking, too expensive, to be a joke—these were real ads. After some searching he found the contents page and worked his way through the fine print that he could hardly read until he came to the publisher's name. Saxon-Morris Publishers, Inc., and they must have money because they were in the Saxon-Morris Building; he knew it: one of the new granite slabs on Park Avenue.

They weren't getting away with it! A spark of anger blazed bravely in Amos Cabot's thin bosom. He had made the Fifth Avenue Coach Company send him a letter of apology about the way that driver had talked to him on St. Patrick's day, and the Triborough Automatic Drink Company had refunded him 50 cents in stamps for coins their machines had consumed without giving refreshment in return. Now Saxon-Morris were going to find out that they couldn't get away with it either!

It had been warm out, but March was a changeable month so he put on his heavy wool muffler. A couple of dollars should more than cover the costs of the excursion, bus fares and a cup of tea in the Automat, so he took two wrinkled bills from behind the sugar can. Watch out, Saxon-Morris, you just watch out.

It was very difficult to see anyone at Saxon-Morris without an appointment. The girl with upswept red hair and layers of glazed makeup wasn't even sure that they had a magazine called *Hereafter*. There was a list of all the Saxon-Morris publications on the wall behind her red, kidney-shaped desk, but the gold letters on dark green marble were hard to read in the dim light. When he kept insisting she searched through a booklet of names and telephone numbers and finally, reluctantly, agreed that it was one of their magazines.

"I want to see the editor."

"Which editor is it you want to see?"

"Any editor, don't matter a damn." Her cold manner became even colder when the word touched her.

"Might I ask your business?"

"That's my business. Let me see the editor."

It was more than an hour before she found someone

whom he could see, or perhaps she just grew tired of his sitting there and glowering at her. After a number of muffled conversations she hung up the phone.

"If you just go through that door there first turn to the right then up one half flight fourth door on the left Mr. Mercer will see you room 782."

Amos was instantly lost in the maze of passages and grey doors, but the second time he stumbled into a mail room one of the bored youths led him to 782. He pushed in without knocking.

"You Mercer, the editor of *Hereafter*?"

"Yes, I'm Mercer." He was a chubby man with a round face and rounder glasses, squeezed behind a desk that filled the end of the tiny and windowless office. "But this is circulation, not editorial. The girl at the front desk said you had a circulation problem."

"I got a problem all right—why you sending me your blasted magazine that I don't want?"

"Well—perhaps I can help you there: which publication are you referring to . . .?"

"*Hereafter*, that's the one."

"Yes, that's one in my group." Mercer opened two files before he found the right folder, then he scratched through it and came up with a sheet of paper. "I'm afraid I can't be of any help to you, Mr. Cabot. You must be on the free-subscription list and we can't cancel them. Sorry."

"What do you mean, *sorry*! I don't want the filthy thing and you better stop sending it!"

Mercer tried to be friendly and succeeded in conjuring up an artificial smile. "Let's be reasonable, Mr. Cabot, that's a high quality magazine and you are receiving it for nothing. Why a subscription costs ten dollars a year! If you have been lucky enough to be chosen for a free sub you shouldn't complain . . ."

"Who chose me for a free subscription? I didn't send anything in."

"No, you wouldn't have to. Your name probably appeared on one of the lists that we purchase from insurance companies, veterans' hospitals and the like. *Hereafter* is one of our throwaway magazines. Of course

I don't mean that we throw them away—on the contrary they go to very selected subscribers—but we don't make our costs back from subscriptions but from the advertisers' fees. In a sense they underwrite the costs of these fine magazines, so you can say it is sort of a public service. Like for new mothers: we buy lists from all the hospitals and send out 6 months subs of YOUR BABY, with some really fine advice and articles, and of course the ads which are educational in themselves . . .”

“Well I'm no new mother! Why are you sending me your rag?”

“*Hereafter* is a bit different from *Your Baby*, but is still a service publication. It's a matter of statistics, sir. Every day just so many people die, of certain ages and backgrounds and that kind of thing. The people in the insurance companies, actuaries I think they call them, keep track of all these facts and figures and draw up plenty of graphs and tables. Very accurate, they assure me. They have life expectancy down to a fine art. They take a man, say like yourself, of a certain age, background, physical fitness, environment and so on, and pinpoint down the date of death very exactly. Not the day and hour and that kind of thing. I suppose they could if they wanted too, but for our purposes a period of two years is satisfactory. This gives us a number of months and issues to acquaint the subscriber with our magazine and the services offered by our advertisers, so by the time the subscriber dies the ad-messages will have reached saturation.”

“Are you telling me I'm going to die inside the next two years?” Amos shrieked hoarsely, flushing with anger.

“I'm not telling you, sir, no indeed!” Mercer drew away a bit and wiped some of the old man's spittle from his glasses with his handkerchief. “That is the actuaries' job. Their computer has come up with your name and sent it to me. They say you will die within two years. As a public service we send you *Hereafter*, a service nothing more.”

“I ain't going to die in two years, not me! Not Amos Cabot!”

“That is entirely up to you, sir. My position here is

just a routine one. Your subscription has been entered and will be cancelled only when a copy is returned with the imprint *Addressee deceased*."

"I'm not going to die!"

"That might possibly happen, though I can't recall any cases offhand. But since it is a two year subscription I imagine it will expire automatically at the end of the second year, if not cancelled beforehand. Yes, that's what would happen."

It ruined Amos's day and though the sun was shining warmly he never noticed it. He went home and thought so much about the whole thing that he couldn't sleep. Next day was no better and he began to wonder if this was part of the message the dreadful magazine had conveyed—that death was close by. They were so sure of it, why did he not relax and agree with them? Send in his will, order the plot, tomb, gravestone, Last Message forms and quietly expire.

"No! They'll not do it to me!"

At first he thought he would wait for next month's copy and write *Addressee deceased* and send it back to them: that would stop the copies coming sure enough. Then he remembered fat little Mercer and could see his happy expression when the cancellation crossed his desk. Right again, dead on schedule as always. Old fool should have known you can't lick statistics. Old fool indeed! He would show them. The Cabots were a long-lived family no matter what the records said, and a hard-headed one too. They weren't going to kill him off that easily.

After much wheedling he got in to see the doctor at his old union and talked him into making a complete and thorough physical check-up.

"Not bad, not bad at all for an old boy," the doctor told him while he was buttoning his shirt.

"I'm only seventy-two: that's not old!"

"Of course it's not," the doctor said soothingly. "Just statistics, you know, a man of your age with your background . . ."

"I know all about those damned statistics, I didn't come to you for that. What's the report say?"

"You can't complain about your physical shape,

Amos," he said, scanning the sheet. "Blood pressure looks all right, but you're leaning towards anemia. Do you eat much liver and fresh greens?"

"Hate liver. Greens cost too much."

"That's your choice. But remember—you can't take it with you. Spend some more money on food. Give your heart a break, don't climb too many stairs."

"I live three flights up: how do I avoid stairs?"

"That's your choice again. If you want to take care of the old ticker move to the ground floor. And vitamin D in the winter and . . ."

There was more, and after he had swallowed his first anger Amos made notes. There were food and vitamins and sleep and fresh air and a whole list of nonsense as long as your arm. But there was also the two year subscription of *Hereafter*, so he bent back over his notes.

Without his realizing why, the next months passed quickly. He was busy, finding a room on the ground floor, changing his eating habits, getting settled in his new place. At first he used to throw out *Hereafter* whenever its gloomy bulk shadowed his mail slot, but when a year had passed he grew bolder. There was an ad for mausoleums and one of the finest had a big tag on it labelled in red RESERVED FOR YOU. *Not for me!!!* he scrawled above and tore it from the magazine and mounted it on the wall. He followed it with other pictures: friendly grave-diggers beckoning towards raw openings in the earth, cut-to-order coffins with comfortable padding and all the rest. When eighteen months had passed he enjoyed himself throwing darts at A Photograph of The Founder of Incino-Top-rate, the Urn for Eternity, and carefully checked off the passing days on the calendar.

Only in the final few months did he begin to worry. He felt fine and the union doctor congratulated him for being a great example, but this didn't matter. Were the actuaries right—had his time almost run out? He could have worried himself to death, but that was not the way Cabots died! He would face this out and win.

First there were weeks left, then only days. The last five days before the copy was due he locked himself in his room and had the delicatessen send up food. It was

expensive but he wasn't going to risk any accidents in the street, now. He had received his twenty-four copies and his subscription should have expired. The next morning would tell. He could not fall asleep at all that night, even though he knew that regular sleep was important, but just lay there until the sky brightened. He dozed for a bit then, but woke up as soon as he heard the postman's footsteps outside. This was the day, would the magazine be there? His heart was pounding and he made himself go slow as he got into the bathrobe. His room was the first on the ground floor, right next to the entrance, and all he had to do was step out into the hall and open the front door.

"Morning," he said to the postman.

"Yeah," the man answered, slinging his heavy bag around and digging into it. Amos closed the door first—then feverishly went through his mail.

It wasn't there.

He had won!

If this was not the happiest day in his life it was close to it. Besides this his victories over the bus company and the coin machine crooks were nothing. This was a war won, not a battle. He'd licked them, licked their statistics and actuaries, accountants, mechanical brains, card files, clerks and editors. He had won! He drank a beer—the first one in two years—then another, and laughed and talked with the gang at the bar. He had won. He fell into bed late and slept like a log until he was dragged awake by his landlady knocking on the door.

"Mail for you, Mr. Cabot. Mail."

Fear gripped him, then slowly ebbed away. It couldn't be. In two years *Hereafter* had never been late once, not one day. It must be some other mail—though this wasn't his check day. He slowly opened the door and took the large envelope, his grip so loose that it almost fell from his fingers.

Only when he had laid it on the bed did he breathe naturally again—it wasn't *Hereafter* in its vile blue envelope: this one was a gentle pink. It did contain a magazine though, just about the size of *Hereafter*, a bulky magazine with lots of pages. Its title was

SENILITY—and the black letters were drawn in such a way that they looked as though they were made of cracked and crumbling stone—and underneath it said *The Magazine of Geri-ART-trics*. There was a picture of a feeble old man in a wheel chair with a blanket around his shoulders, sucking water through a curved glass tube. Inside was more. Ads for toilet chairs and hemorrhoid cushions, crutches and crank beds, articles on *Learn Braille When The Eyesight Goes*, and *Happy Though Bedridden and Immobile for Twenty-five Years*. A letter dropped out of the magazine and he half-read phrases here and there.

Welcome to the family . . . the magazine of geri-ART-trics that teaches you the art of growing old . . . many long years ahead of you . . . empty years . . . what happiness to find a copy in your mailbox every month . . . speaking book-edition for the blind . . . braille for the deaf . . . every month . . .

There were tears in his eyes when he looked up. It was dark, a rainy and cold April morning with the wind rattling the window. Raindrops ran down the glass like great, cold tears.

Harry Harrison.

*Here, from a newcomer, is a promise of tinges of sanity
in the lunatic world we are about to create.*

THE MADMAN

by Alistair Bevan

Roger Morrison sat in sector station 288 and stared at his hands. He was not manacled in the old-fashioned way but on each wrist they had slipped a metallic band, tinted pink to tone with the wearer's flesh. Roger sighed and across the room the young sergeant looked up sharply. One of his hands hovered over a switch set in the desk top; Roger knew if the control was touched his wrists would be drawn together by the sinister cuffs. He rested his hands on his knees again, stared at the ceiling and wondered what would happen to him.

Roger was old even for the twenty-first century; he was past a hundred now and ought to have had more sense. Still what was done was done; he wondered what the charge would be. Malicious assault on a wishing-well perhaps. There would be a stiff sentence for that.

He had been in trouble before though there had been nothing as serious as this. He had always been eccentric but his wild talk had been tolerated as the rambling of an elderly man. People had even come to listen while he mumbled on about the old days when cars were steered by their drivers and you bought your food raw and cooked it. Roger would pull at his moustache, itself a rare anachronism, and rave about the glories of steak-and-chips and opera houses and what it was like to hold the wheel of a motor and drive fast into a bend. Pre-travel-lator vehicles were usually a safe topic, though how anyone could ever have enjoyed such dangerous machines was outside the modern understanding.

It had always been difficult to know when to stop; there had been that party a month ago for instance when he had over-reached himself to the extent of talking about

the brewing of beer. One of the guests had left hurriedly and he had heard she had been made ill. After that there had been a week of confinement for Roger, a time of sitting in his room with only sad thoughts for company.

Both his grand-daughter Gentle and her husband Marvin C50 had done their best for him, and he should have tried to be more grateful. He had behaved very badly over the EterniScreen. Until a few years back you had been able to see real things on the old films they ran on the video Sunday afternoons: trees and grass, flowers, once an actual sailing boat. But in time the last of the films had worn out or been suppressed, Roger was not sure which, and he had had the Screen taken out of his bedroom. That had happened only a month or so after the C50's moved to Estate 9,740 where the houses were expensive and a screenless room represented social degradation. True the noisy thing had worried Roger and upset his sleep but that was beside the point: the principles involved should have been more important than his feelings. He had been nothing but a nuisance to the C50's for years; he could see that now.

On the sergeant's desk a light glowed and wobbled. He spoke into a microphone and the light went out. He went back to his work and after a few moments Roger's heart stopped clanking against his ribs. They were not coming for him just yet . . .

The wishing-well had started the trouble. It was a harmless toy and pretty in its way but it had sent him off the rails. It had come in kit form and the assembly had been done by a neighbour, Edward T900, who was clever with his hands. At first when the children dragged him out to see it Roger had forced himself to smile and nod, admiring the pink plastic roof, the acid-yellow roller with the coil of rope impressed on its surface, the little blue bucket hanging beneath it. Then the children had pulled him forward and made him lean over the tiny shaft and as his head blocked the light gnome-voices began to pipe and gobble and utter soft spells and mystic verses. Suddenly Roger's mind seemed to explode. He rose to his full height, stared round at the bright little houses, the lawns of viridian Flexigrass, the neat lane

with its single gently chuffing traveller; at the flushed faces of the children and at Edward T900, standing smirking with a little hammer still gripped in his hand. Before he realized it Roger was beating the bright plastic well with his bright plastic walking stick and the stick was rebounding and twanging and Caroline was backing off wide-eyed and little Two, to whom the computers had not as yet assigned a name, was running bawling for his mum . . .

Roger had been sent to his room of course but he had not waited for the terrible Homecoming of Marvin. He sat on the bed till his heartbeat slowed to something like its normal rate, then he got out his travelling suit. He changed hastily, old hands fumbling at the magnetic clamps, snapping them all awry. He left quietly by the back door, hurried down the path and lost himself in the endless Estate. An hour later he came to a Main Through and caught a bus. He fed the autoconductor a fistful of plastic tokens and sat back to recover his breath again, not caring for the moment where the vehicle was headed. He sat indifferently for half an hour, seeing and not seeing the pink ribbons of houses jerk past on either side. Then the height of the buildings increased and above them rose towers of Imicrystal. A sign told him he was entering Towncentre 871. That was where Marvin worked. Roger left the bus and began to walk.

Everything was confusing. He felt bemused by the streams of traffic; each traveller bore hundreds of what were now called cars, bright plastic boxes clamped securely to the moving beds. The tracks criss-crossed endlessly, diving over and under each other in a bewildering way. He passed parking lots where the vehicles were trundling off the pads on their own tiny, aborted wheels; here there was much bleating of hooters and bonking of plastic fenders; red-faced drivers shouted at each other and indignantly flourished their rating tickets.

Roger saw many strange things. There were little gardens clapped between the office blocks, places of apparent verdure where full-size puppets of crinoline ladies endlessly watered beds of imitation roses; street videobooths where goods were displayed to the scurrying

public; once a fairground, very old and tawdry, with little square tents housing sideshows. Roger hurried forward, drawn by the magnificence of real canvas, but as he got closer he saw the dirt streaks were imitations. The tents were plastic too. One of them claimed to exhibit a live dog and Roger hesitated: he would dearly have loved to see a dog again after all these years. Eventually he carried on past. By now, Gentle would have informed the police; it would be only too easy to get picked up loitering in 871: it was the first place they would look.

He had a plan. He had decided on his first objective; he thought of the name of the place, rolled it round his tongue. Yes, he would go there if he could. On the way he might see a tree, perhaps a whole wood. Thinking of these old things reminded him of others. Books, for instance, or real food. He would like a meal that could be chewed: he was sick of this pipeline mush. And beer, of course; that was a thing of the past. There were only the fourteen flavoured Unimilks; nobody drank beer any more. Roger squared his shoulders. If there was a place where there were still beer and books and trees, he would find it.

He soon saw what he was looking for, an illuminated sign that proclaimed a travel agency. He went inside and managed to get the information he needed and change his tokens for the correct ones. Then he located the place where the long distance travellers came in. 871 covered part of what used to be known as Surrey; Wiltshire was a good way off; it was going to be a long drive.

The next bus was not due for half an hour. Roger waited impatiently. When the vehicle arrived he lost no time boarding it. It padded within minutes and he was able to relax. So far, so good.

An hour later he was feeling the beginnings of despair. There had been no break in the flood of houses, no sign of the great Preserves once established on and around Salisbury Plain. The little houses marched on, rash-pink and endless. He saw mile after mile of front gardens, gnome-peopled, snug under their clear plastic shields. A light rain began to fall. That was the only thing that gave any sense of adventure; as he entered a fresh weather

sector Precipitation occurred nearly two hours earlier than usual. The rain ran down the bus windows; he almost missed the neon sign that told him he was coming into Towncentre 437.

Roger scrubbed at the water-streaked Clarivoo as the sign flashed by. Beneath the number was grudgingly placed the word "Salisbury". Surely below that again was the ghost of a third name. Sarum, that old place on a hill . . . the old man shook his head. The third name had just been in his mind.

"Salisbury" was like anywhere else. Maybe there was a higher proportion of plastic half-timbering, but that was all. He looked for the spire of the cathedral but there was nothing in sight. They must have taken it down. Roger put his face in his hands.

He only looked up when the autoconductor snapped, "Stonehenge, sir." He got out of the vehicle stiffly. The rain had stopped and there was a pallid sun. The old man stared round, baffled. The bus had stopped in front of a very large flat-roofed building faced all over with violent green plastic tiles. Roger walked toward the entrance. The doors opened for him with a pneumatic whistle. Just inside was a signboard. There was the lettering "Stonehenge. Ancient British Monument. Main Lounge", and a flashing red arrow to show him which way to go. Above the arrow a neon druid eternally reaped a harvest of electric mistletoe . . .

Someone came into the chargeroom and the sergeant stood up. The newcomer talked quietly for some minutes and a sheaf of papers changed hands. Then he walked over to Roger. "Grandfather 178847 stroke C50?"

Roger moistened his lips. "Yes, I suppose that's me."

The man said, "Right, come on then. Quickly please, no trouble." He gripped Roger's elbow. The old man tried indignantly to release his arm but his protests were ignored. As he was propelled through the door he asked faintly: "Am I . . . being taken home?"

The policeman was in a bad temper. "Six kids under psycho, five three-eight-threes, malicious damage, assault . . . try another."

Roger said a little desperately "I still have some rights.

Please contact my grand-daughter, Gentle C50 . . .”

The other grunted. “We have. She disowned you.” He opened the street door and Roger saw a black vehicle drawn up outside. Its rear doors were open; the inside of the van was padded and there were two seats facing each other. The policeman gave him a shove. He said: “Up you go, then.” Roger sat in one of the chairs; his escort took the other. The old man felt the trembling start again. There was only one place for old folk whose families disowned them . . . He massaged his arm where the policeman’s fingers still seemed to be compressing the muscle. Six kids under psycho? It surely hadn’t been as bad as that.

A lamp came on in the roof and the doors slid shut. The car started up and bumped onto a traveller. Within minutes the landing gear was down again and recurring lurches and bangs told Roger they were pad-shifting. Soon it became obvious from the high-pitched din beneath them that the Blackmire was riding an Expressalator. That would be Alpha double plus; Roger had acquired VIP status after all. Marvin would have been quite jealous; this made his Beta Minus rating look like a Scooterpass . . .

The old man had no idea how far they travelled. Eventually the jarring transferences began again and soon the car was trundling forward under its own power. The doors opened and Roger had a glimpse of white walls gliding past. The machine stopped. He had an impression of a building of vast size, a forecourt with fountains playing. He was herded under the entrance patio. He managed to read the inscription above the doors and his worst fears were realized. He was entering Department Sixty Eight of the newly created Ministry for Mental Health. This was a Sector Asylum.

He was hurried through the entrance hall, along a corridor, into a lift, down another corridor. The journey seemed endless. He had to give his number and name, press his Identitag into desk sensors. Eventually he was taken to a little cubicle where there were two chairs, again set facing each other. By this time he had ceased to protest; he sat down and his guard slumped unconcernedly

opposite him. Roger wondered if the end of the whole complicated process would be euthanasia. In a way he hoped it would be and that they would come to it quickly. He would have killed himself before they took him but they had given him no time.

A light flashed in one of the walls. The policeman got up, resumed his hateful grip on Roger's arm and guided him down another corridor, somehow not quite so austere-looking as the lower parts of the hospital. At the end was a white door with a name on it: Doctor Collins. The guard knocked in the old-fashioned way. The door opened and Roger was chivvied into a pleasant-looking office. There was a grey vinyl fabric carpet, a mural of fish done in blue glass. A desk at which a young man was sitting. He wore heavy-framed glasses and a white synthetic fibre jacket. As Roger entered he took off the glasses and studied him. Then he came round the desk and pulled a chair forward. He said: "Good morning, Mr. Morrison, isn't it? Come and sit down for a minute, will you, I think we've got one or two things to go through." Then to the policeman, "Right, thank you, I shan't need you again. Oh, by the way . . ." He pointed at Roger's wrists. "Take those damn things with you: we don't use them here."

Roger sat down, gingerly wondering why the Doctor had bothered with his name when he had a perfectly good number. The young man waited till the door had closed, then leaned back and smiled. "Well Mr. Morrison, I've got a report here that says you're violent. Are you violent?"

Roger considered carefully. This was not quite what he had expected. At last he said, "Yes, I suppose I am. I attacked a wishing-well. I broke several other things later on, but that was the first. I think it gave me a taste for it."

The Doctor nodded. "It probably would. Now, Mr. Morrison, when you attacked this wishing-well, did it occur to you that you might be doing something silly?"

Roger nodded. "That did go through my mind. I regretted the affair almost at once. I was sorry I'd frightened the children."

"You regretted it, you say?" A note was made on the pad. Or was it just a doodle? Roger said, "Yes. Well I suppose, to be truthful, I regretted the necessity. Certainly not the act."

The Doctor said "I see. Now tell me, if you can, if you went home now and saw the same wishing-well and had the same stick in your hand, would you do it again?"

Roger muttered "I can't go home. I'm disowned."

The Doctor picked up a stylus and held it between the tips of his fingers. He said, "Answer the question, please."

"I'm sorry, Doctor. Yes, if I went back I should do the same thing again. Particularly after what I've seen. I should try to smash the beastly thing to pieces."

"Why?"

"I don't know. There a lot of reasons. I suppose mainly because it's a sterile and horrible motif. An imitation of an imitation of nothing in particular. I hate things like that."

The young man nodded, pursing his lips. "When did you last go to Stonehenge, Mr. Morrison? Prior of course to this week?"

Roger tugged at his moustache. "Nearly sixty years ago."

"And what was it like, all that time back?"

Roger hesitated but the words had to come out. "It was like it had always been. There was a wind. And the stones rising, and the Plain all round. It was . . . an old place. Nothing there except things that had been there forever. It was a place to go if you wanted to think."

"Did you go there to think about something?"

"What were you thinking about, Mr. Morrison?"

"Why Stonehenge? Why did it have to be there?"

An hour of the probing. The questions were like steps cut in rock and as you went down them answering each and moving on to the next it was as if water was closing over your head and you were going back in time. I remember the stones and the wind, the wind seething in the grass, the rolling gunsmoke of the clouds . . .

"Clouds?"

There were clouds and there was grass. The wind ruffled it, made dark waves like the sea. I remember,

they'd marked the Aubrey pits with concrete. If you made a hole there in the ground you could find it in a thousand years because the land had never been dug or ploughed since the hills came shouldering up out of the sea. Oh, I remember . . . but Marie was dead, that last time. It didn't matter so much because I could still hear the larks and feel the wind . . .

"Marie?"

Oh yes I can remember so well. I was a southerner once in the long ago when people were real, when there was a Dorset and a Somerset and a Devon. Sarum was only a name but now even that's gone. There's a number, and fizzing lights on a board. They moved the cathedral off Old Sarum hill down to the water meadows; left it there for a man to paint. But now they've taken it away. And I know not where they have laid it . . .

I went to the sea but there were no gulls. I can remember the gulls, and the turn of an ankle, a touch, hair in the wind, the grass, a little red car booming and bumping over the hills, before the travellers came . . . But Marie died and there were years and years making plastic things in a factory in London, and the children growing and drifting off; then there were no cars any more and the hedges and trees all gone and Marie dead, and they murdered the big Henge and the places we'd known . . . and they put Videoscreens on all the walls, and I couldn't think, and I got older and older and older . . .

Embarrassment. Roger trying to apologise for rambling. The Doctor sitting with the stylus between his fingers, watching and listening. He cut the apology short. "It doesn't matter. You're here to talk."

A long quiet. Then the young man said "Twenty years ago the Stonehenge Preserve was taken for Development. It was the last one in the country. The Authority put up a good fight but it was a losing battle from the first, of course. In the long run the whole concept of rural preservation was doomed; I think that must have been obvious as far back as the nineteen sixties." He flicked over a paper on his desk. "You did some damage there, though, before you left."

Roger nodded. "Yes, quite a lot. It was the stones,

you see . . . I though there would be a courtyard somewhere in that . . . heliport, I think they called it. But there was a lounge. Wide and carpeted, with the stones popping up through holes in the floor like jokes. They were painted gold and silver of course to harmonise with their surroundings. I suppose the effect was quite handsome. I went back and threw a vase of artificial flowers at that appalling druid. It seemed the least I could do. You see I construed it as an insult to the place as I . . . well, as I remembered it. That was wrong of me, but they seemed to have insulted the stones."

"And Marie," said the Doctor. "And all the people ever who had something free in their minds and wild, and wanted a better world. Not a safer one: a better one."

Roger was startled. "Yes. I . . . I think that was it, more or less. That seems to sum it up quite well."

"It should," said the young man drily. "They're your words. Spoken in substation eighteen hundred at . . . let's see, sixteen thirty hours yesterday." He smiled. "You were Videxed rather well, I'm afraid."

Roger said vaguely, "I don't remember . . . I expect I said a lot of silly things. I don't think I was quite myself, you see."

The Doctor nodded. "Of course. Well, returning to your peccadillo with the signboard: you got away with that one, didn't you?"

Roger had forgotten to be afraid. "Oh yes. There was no-one near when I did it, you see. It went off with a tremendous bang and then of course people came running. They asked me if I'd seen anyone go past and I said I had not. I was quite truthful. So they all hurried off. I think they were looking for someone younger."

Unexpectedly, the Doctor chuckled. "And then you went through the West Country, leaving quite a trail of wreckage. Why, Mr. Morrison?"

The old man said sadly "I wanted to see the hills before I died. I think when I looked into that awful phoney well I realized I would never see anything again that wasn't false or plastic or an imitation. I wanted grass and trees again, just once. Somehow if I could find

them, Marie and the old life wouldn't be quite so dead."

"But you didn't find them."

Roger shook his head. He tried to explain how he had felt as he had gone on and on, always with the little houses marching alongside. He had reached the sea but the very cliffs had been flattened and the houses were jealous and had crept out over the water on little platforms and thin stilt legs and there were caissons with shield walls to cut off openness and distance and the crinoline ladies ducked and bobbed and sprinkled the bright dead plants just as they had done in Surrey. It was there that Roger had been caught after a score of mad episodes mainly involving the lawn effigies. When the police arrived he had been trying to teach a terrified little girl the principles of flying a kite. The Doctor shook his head over that part of the report. "Most of this is so very boring . . . why did you speak to the child in the first place?"

Roger made shapes with his hands. "It was because of the kite. It had a little engine in it; it rose on its own. A real kite was different. The wind held it up. Marie loved kites. I wanted to feel there was still someone who knew about them, knew how it felt when a kite sailed and pulled in the wind."

The Doctor said, "But, unfortunately, there is no wind. We control the weather too carefully to permit it."

"I tried to tell them," said Roger excitedly. "I put it in my statement. I told them about kites. And then I said I wanted real wood to hold, or a book. I asked them to bring me a book." He stopped and bit his lip. "If you could just tell me . . . I mean, about being mad. Am I mad? You know, completely?"

The young man regarded him mildly. "I shouldn't think so for a minute. Unfortunately I'm not really qualified to judge."

Roger was baffled. "But . . . you're a Doctor, aren't you?"

"Yes, Mr. Morrison, I'm a Doctor. But of philosophy, not medicine."

Roger sat and stared.

The young man said briskly "Well, Mr. Morrison, what

are we going to do with you? We can't have you rushing off looking for green fields, you know. To begin with, you wouldn't be successful."

Roger said slowly, "Nothing left? No hills? "

"Afraid not. England is a Development."

The old man said indistinctly, "Somewhere to grow food. I thought there had to be somewhere . . . "

"Not so. Hydroponics, and the sea . . . they account for everything." The Doctor's voice lost some of its liveliness. He said, "It was foreseen, of course. War, or this . . . There was a man called Russell. Very unpopular; as I remember, he was jailed . . . Well, we avoided war. So the farmlands had to go, and the hills. Faith had never quite managed to move mountains. Population pressure was much more effective."

"I don't think we can blame any individual or any group for the subsequent shift of values to . . . how did you define it? 'The sterile and the horrible' I think. It was better all round to forget what had been loosely termed our heritage. The Videoscreens helped; in time, old values ceased to have any meaning. We taught ourselves to hate them as symbols of insecurity; in consequence we hate those like yourself who remind us of them too clearly. The development of the urban cult: it makes an interesting study. In essence what we have now is a mutant society. Dead of course, but very stable."

Roger stared at the floor. He said, "I rather think I'm mad. Is there a cure? "

The Ph.D. nodded. "Yes, of course there is. We can cure anything here, if that's what you want."

Roger tried to make words. "Gentle would expect it . . . "

The Doctor got up and walked round to the front of the desk. He stood leaning on it and looking down. He said: "If your eye offend you, pluck it out and cast it from you. Or your hand, or foot. We can give you new ones without any trouble. We could give you a new brain. Or a heart—a modern hygienic one made of rubber and gold. We could set it in your body and start it clacking, and throw your old one away . . . "

Roger did not answer. There was a confused sound in

his ears; it seemed to be the noise of travellers, a mindless, country-wide roaring. He could sense the grinding weight of them and the pressure of all the little houses shouldering at each other, scrinching down on the tiny land. The young man walked across the room and pressed a button. There was a hissing, a burst of light. Roger lifted his head and blinked. Then he got up. The wall had become a window and through it could be seen the central area of the hospital. The place was built in a great hollow square. Its inner walls were faced with stone, grey and quiet. The walls almost vanished in the distance and all the middle space was grass. There were trees and little walks, and people strolled about, and a dog was running free. The Doctor watched Roger's face for a few moments, then he touched the control again. The panel closed, leaving Roger blinking like a man who had seen a vision. The Doctor shook his head. "I don't think we could let you loose on the world again, Mr. Morrison. You might go to John O' Groats next time, breaking up gnomes' picnics all the way. Better to stay with us. We can give you grass and trees. You'll find them nowhere else."

He walked the length of the office, chin on chest, hands clasped behind him. He said, "The Sector Asylums. What are they? Difficult to say. Not quite art galleries, not quite libraries. I like to think of them as repositories for something rather too precious to be readily definable. Maybe the human spirit. I wouldn't know." He frowned. "I should like to have seen the Henge as it was, with the clouds moving behind it. A long way back, that was . . ."

He became brisk again. "Well, anyway, let's see what we can offer you here. We're quite well set up on the literary side." He ticked off points on his fingers. "We're rather proud of our Breeches Bible and we've got a Johnson dictionary—I forget which edition. There's a bit of everything, really the fourteenth *Britannica*, Hutchin's *Dorset* . . . we're still cataloguing some of our stuff: perhaps you'd like to help when you're settled in. I think you'll find a lot to occupy you, but if you should work through our stock we arrange crossovers with other Asylums quite regularly. The folk over in 76 have turned

into car specialists: they've got all sorts of rarities. Some superb contraptions called Bentleys—you might remember them . . . 380 at Durham are the scrap merchants: fair organs, uniforms, gargoyles and pew-ends—you name it, they've got one of it at least. We're all rather jealous of 420 down in New Dorchester—they haven't been on the job long but they've got a Bugatti and the *Book of Kells* . . . but I'm afraid I'm rushing you. Don't try to get the picture all at once; sleep on it. Tomorrow it won't seem so implausible." He took Roger's arm, and this time there was nothing offensive in the gesture. He said, "Come on then, Mr. Morrison. I think we'd better find you some quarters."

They walked through corridor after corridor. It was quiet in the hospital: the noise of the travellers didn't carry at all. On the way the Doctor kept talking. Roger remembered the words, pieced them together later to make a whole.

"We've found it better this way and cheaper in the long run than surgery. We can't offer as much as we'd like, of course: what little land we have you've already seen. We have to keep things secret—secrecy breeds fear and that's regrettable but if we didn't play it that way we should have a howling mob at the doors day and night, all wanting to be declared insane. You see, you're not alone—far from it. As a matter of fact one of our most respected residents is an ex-housing minister. You'll probably remember seeing him on the Videos. You'll like him: he's a thoroughly pleasant chap."

The Doctor paused with his hand on a doorhandle. He said, "You must try to forget a lot of what you've seen. Keeping it in your mind won't help. You'll dream about your hills and the wind, but never lose sight of the fact that you are dreaming. Dreaming is important now; in Utopia, there's little else to do." He opened the door. He said, "Well, in you go; I think you'll find everything you need. Come back and see me in a day or two, or whenever you like, and we'll have another chat. By then I expect you'll have decided what you want to do here. I have to go now. I'm due to meet an old gentleman who set fire to all the roses in Winchester Central Park this

morning because the ones he used to grow in soil were better." The door closed softly behind Roger.

He saw a wide, low room. French windows giving onto a balcony; beyond them the central grassland. The windows were closed against the coming evening and in front of them sat a dozen men and women. Roger looked round. There was no Videoscreen; instead the walls were panelled in rich, dark wood. In a corner was a case with row on row of books.

He moved forward in a daze. There were many wonders in the room, but the chief of them was a grate with a fire of real coal. He walked to the fire and the people made way for him, wishing him a good evening; and some of their voices actually dared to roll and burr. He sat down, trying to answer the greetings but with his eyes and mind on the flames. He crouched, staring, and it came to him that of all the things they could have given him to quiet his soul this was the best, because only fire is as old as the hills.

There was time now, all the time in the world, and he could sit and talk or not talk and watch the fire and doze. Sometime in the evening he was given tea, and the meal was a miracle: little rolls and scones with dabs of real butter; and later there was beer in a tankard just like the ones he remembered, glassy and thick with indentations round the sides. He sat and held the treasure and dreamed and knew that someday soon he would take paints and canvas and make pictures of all the things he remembered, castles and horses and hills, and Marie with the wind in her hair. After nightfall he dozed and the pictures came and made themselves on the fire and he saw things he had known a lifetime back in a different world: motor cars and people and animals and once the Henge as it used to be when dawns and sunsets burned behind it. Then he saw all the houses that covered the land burning, their walls collapsing, their roofs dropping in. Soon there would be a new beauty of grass. The heat wavered on his face; the fire burned gently, snapping and sending up little puffs of smoke, and the coals fell through to reveal the shapes of new and tiny hills.

Alistair Bevan

JOIK

by Ernest Hill

Puffing a black cheroot, Ngula watched the woman as she sat, an ebony statue, remote, withdrawn. Long, kinky hair rippled about her shoulders and fell, an orderly cascade down the hollowed back; concave, erect, motionless. She looked like something out of the distant past, a memory, a pre-Rationale, a museum piece, or—in these surroundings, a museum in herself. Ngula considered her. She was first Deputy Curator to the North European Chamber of Antiquities, that vast, pre-Rationale collection that no one but an odd student of anthropology ever visited. An unimportant, poorly-paid post, usually held by elderly Injects, or occasionally by someone from the upper echelons of the Trash. This boid, he wondered, had she drawn some pre-Rationale power from her collections, imbibed some of the—was it discipline?—of the past? This, this—dignity—found nowadays only among the Trash?

The room itself was conventional enough, present-day in a Bwana idiom. Austere, round, aluminium-panelled walls, domed thermo-plastic ceiling. Black reclining chairs of fibre-glass with built-in temperature and humidity controls. Mural televisor and televiewer at eye-level with sensory headcap on extending arm. External viewer. Party communication view-panel. Electronic, button-operated storage panels, incinerator ingestor, automatic utensil-washer and storage intake. Selector switch and micro-viewer for play-back library. Everything in its place—but one thing, incongruous, superfluous—irk-some as a white skin before the pigment injection. An object. Ngula regarded it impartially, inhibiting the first atavistic feeling of revulsion, scientifically applying recognition mnemonics. There was no comparable object either in his extensive conscious retention, nor in the vortex of the subliminal.

A clue?—It might be.

"That—that—thing," he asked, "what is it?"

"Thing?" The steady brown eyes met his. "The Chief Investigator of Scientific Security does not know?"

"It ain't scientific." He was again inhibiting an atavistic urge to petulance.

"No," she said, "It ain't scientific."

"Then what is it there for?"

"I don't think you would understand."

"Talk, boid," he said. She inclined her head.

"It is known as embroidery. The pre-Rationales made many such objects from animal fibres."

"Why?"

"Beauty," she said slowly.

Beauty? He had heard of the pre-Rationale belief in beauty, the creation of an object for emotional rather than utilitarian ends, but this was the first example he had seen. He studied the embroidery carefully, feeling the texture and noting the colour sequences, inwardly speculating on its religious or ritual significance. Ngula prided himself on the impartial balance of his psyche.

"Not finished," he noted.

"Nope," she said.

"This is what they called beauty, huh?"

"Not this alone—it took many forms."

"Nope," he said, "means nothing."

"It is not supposed to mean anything."

"Then why have it?"

"I am First Curator of the Museum."

"Sure, sure, boid, but why here in your pad?"

She sat unmoving, looking straight before her with nutmeg eyes, opaque, unseeing. Ngula felt that contact was lost, and contact was essential to his mission.

"Doll," he said "we gotta find your man." A slight inclination of the head signified agreement. That boid reminded him of something—a symbol, a paradox unconnected with work or sex and thus irrational. What was it she was like? A swift memory search conjured an answer from the subliminal. A queen. That was it. A queen. Regal. Regality. The words were triggered

from the depths of a libido—a memory of a short pre-student lecture on anthropological antecedents.

“ Say! ” he said, “ You a Natural or an Inject? ”

She was a Natural. Odd. Had there been black queens in the pre-Rationale? He had thought only whites had been queens and yet some chain of genes had jig-sawed regality in this—a Natural. Dadulina. Professor Tantor’s boid.

“ Listen,” he said, “ Tantor’s gotta be found. Jomo! We gotta find him. He’s the greatest living craft-designer and the pioneer of Joik.” She inclined her head.

“ Were you, or were you not in telepathic contact on the last flight? ”

“ I was.”

“ Ah! ” He took out his pocket recorder and snapped the activator.

“ Tell me his thoughts before the Joik! ” Slowly, she turned her head and looked him clearly in the eyes.

“ You believe,” she said, “ That nothing of the space-craft was found after Tantor activated the Joik? ” She should have known that. She was Tantor’s sex-mate, linked on the same emotional plane. Tantor’s boid.

“ Nothing,” he said. “ He reported to control his speed and position. His last words were ‘ Am operating Joik ’ After that the whole ship disappeared from the screen. The Joik, according to Tantor’s own calculation, should have been a forward leap of ten light-years. We have tracked from a matter of miles to a hundred light-years. We have not traced the ship.”

Dadulina rose and took the embroidery from the securing hooks on the metal wall.

“ This is his woik,” she said. “ It floated down when the space-craft transmuted.” In his astonishment, Ngula hardly noticed the odd choice of final word.

“ How did you find it? ” he asked. “ Telepathy? ”

“ Our plane of intersensory perception was highly developed.”

“ You mean he made this thing? ”

“ Tantor spent many weeks and months in space craft. He found the old crafts relaxing.”

“ Then what happened to the space-craft? ” Dadulina’s

eyes were focussed far into the distances of space and time.

"I do not know" she said. Insubordination? It could be. Ngula rose briskly; switching off the recorder, he replaced it in his pocket.

"You must come with me." Under the fold of his robe, he pressed the assistant-locator buttons. Cardu and Rhoder entered.

"Take her," Ngula ordered, "To the Center for Question."

For an instant only, Dadulina turned and looked toward the wall-bunk, which Ngula noticed for the first time was lowered and unshuttered. A moment later she inclined her head with that regal gesture of acceptance he had already noticed and, flanked by Cardu the one-eyed and Rhoder the two-headed dwarf, she passed through the aperture. The semicircular shutters closed behind her, leaving Ngula alone.

"Transmuted?" he said thoughtfully, "Now why she say transmuted and not joiked?" His inspection of the room was thorough and meticulous, but to the investigator unrewarding. Pressing the labelled locator buttons, he rummaged through the storage drawers. Their contents were orderly, utilitarian, like the contents of all drawers in all pads everywhere. Turning his attention, he inspected the catalogue slips to the replay library. Dadulina was more than usually erudite in the breadth of her listening potential. Even allowing for her position as First Deputy Curator, he was impressed to notice Tartova's "Further Reaches of the Quantum," Mkorta's "Image Projection and Bi-location" and Amga's "Extra-retinal Divination and Digital Sensors." Many of the titles, no doubt referring to antiquities, were strange to him and he noted them mentally with interest. His Rationale dismissed the possibility of any occult knowledge from antiquity being in any way a solution to the problem of Dadulina's relationship with her man but nevertheless her choice of listening material gave an indication of her character. If contact could still be made with Tantor telepathetically, it was important that Dadulina's psyche should be thoroughly investigated and

understood. The micro-prints of the catalogue travelled slowly and steadily behind the lens: Murals—Murillo—Marx—Music. Music? He halted the projector. Somehow, somewhere, he had heard of music; mentally, he had it catalogued along with beauty. A pre-Rationale game of sound, an audio jigsaw. He activated the vernier under the general heading and noted authors with subsidiary indices. Bartok—Beethoven—Delius—Gounod—Hindemith—Mozart—Puccini—Schubert. At random, he ran his eye down the subsidiary vernier and noted the game-titles, stopping the projector arbitrarily at the 8th Symphony (Unfinished). He pressed the replay button and, taking a long black cigar from the narcotics dispenser, he settled down to listen, fitting it into his anti-carcinogen filter. As the blue smoke curled to the domed ceiling, the sound waves vibrated to the opening chords of Schubert, reflecting the emotions, passions and intellect of the pre-Rationale age, ten thousand years before. Curiously, Ngula concentrated his Rationale, wondering how the game had been played, to what rules and for what stakes. Abstractly, he noted the frequency variations in the sound sequences, the harmonics, the varying timbres of the individual instruments and in his rational mind an oscillographic image formed. Thoughtfully, he maintained full concentration to the end, hopeful of some instruction or clue to the purpose and meaning of the sounds, but, as the last chords thundered, he was left baffled and perplexed. Whatever had inspired Professor Tantor, had motivated that great Rational to devote his life to the mastery of Joik would hardly be found in this simple archaic sound puzzle. Regretfully, Ngula tossed the stub end of the cigar into the incinerator aperture, pressed the 'Emerge' button and, as the shutters separated, stepped out on to the departure slipway. The sleek, transparent state transport streaked forward, the doors slid back and a moment later Ngula was whisked to the Scientific Security Building overlooking the Thames on Tower Hill. Strange, he thought, in a rare mood of subjective introspection, the importance we place on the black skin. Dadulina's pad had been well situated high on a hill at Dulwich and Ngula had noticed the

sun briefly as he stepped from the slipway to the vehicle. This city, he thought, our capital, is a city of shadows. Who, living and working among these giant concrete beehives ever sees the sun for more than a moment as it passes from pinnacle to pinnacle, obscured even then by the tracery of monorails threaded from monolith to monolith? And yet our skins must be black as once they were—burned by the sun in a distant age when blacks were dominant and whites enslaved. It was right that the blacks should have triumphed, for that was progress, the whites had been primitive, living in tribal communities ruled by queens and worshipping a tribal god called Imperialismus, Kapital, or Marx—the name had varied. Yet now there was something pre-Rationale in the determination to maintain the colour strain. Genetically, it had no meaning, no significance. Whites were born everywhere and in every way the blacks' equals and yet, for subconscious reasons of irrational fear, must be injected soon after birth, must grow black, or be for ever outcast, albinos, unclean. Yes, he thought, in this sun-starved capital, it is the last link with the pre-Rationales, an archaism that none dare question, since all are black and would fear and despise a white. Perhaps the beehive shapes of the monoliths had also a pre-Rationale origin. Would not, he thought, cubes have been more utilitarian?

The guards snapped to attention as Ngula, muttering the code word for the day, activated the shutter mechanism and stepped through the Bwana's aperture and into the S.S.B. A moment later, he stepped from the travolator and, muttering a second code word into the audio ingress mechanism, he entered Room 208, the Subject Question Laboratory.

Dadulina was sitting naked and seemingly unmoved in the inquisitorial chair. Her wrists, strapped to its arms, were swathed in sensory filaments, the encephalograph mounting sat snugly on her head like a skull-cap. Below her left breast, the electrocardiograph attachment was in place. She showed no fear, no emotion; erect, withdrawn, remote as a vaginal effigy in stone.

Ngula glanced at the oscillograph, noting the thought

rhythms, pulse and emotional turbulence levels, nervous quotients and resistance indices. Cybernetics substantiated optics. Dadulina was as cool a doll as she looked. Ngula studied the tapes. The assistant's questions, Dadulina's answers, the veridity and probability quotients. Baffled, he looked at the monitor array. All lights were at green, error through technical failure impossible.

"What do you make of it?" he asked.

Vordunga, the assistant inquisitor, shook his head, his bloodshot eyes seemingly without focus. Ngula read from the final summary.

Tantor both alive and dead.

Tantor here but not here.

Dadulina can contact as he is, cannot contact as he was.

No evidence of contact but contact continuous.

"Another plane of existence? Another dimension?" He asked. There was much speculation nowadays on existence planes since the discovery of the intersensory pulsations through an extra-spatial dimension.

"Card 9." Vordunga, the hunchback, indicated the indices. Ngula selected the card containing the specific questions and answers.

Question. Is Tantor then here, but on another plane?

Answer. No. We are on the other plane. *Veridity exact.*

Question. If we are one plane, Tantor must be on another?

Answer. We are on no plane at all. *Veridity exact.*

Question. Tantor is then on a plane?

Answer. Tantor is on the only plane. *Veridity exact.*

Question. Can you then contact Tantor?

Answer. Yes. I am with Tantor. *Veridity quasi normal.*

Question. Can you then pass a message to Tantor?

Answer. No. I have no means of contact. *Veridity exact.*

Question. If you are with Tantor, you can contact him?

Answer. No. I cannot be contacted. *Veridity quasi normal.*

Question. But you are here.

Answer. No. I am with Tantor. *Veridity quasi normal.*

"The first boid," said Vordunga abstractly, "to beat

the machine." Ngula shook his head.

"No boid can beat the machine.' He sat for a long time looking at Dadulina, considering her dark form and the implication of the interrogation.

"I have a suggestion." Vordunga broke in on his abstract reasoning.

"Make it!" said Ngula, who had reached no conclusion.

"As I see it, it's this way. Tantor lives, maybe on some other plane, some extra-terrestrial pad if you like. This boid knows about the plane—can't or won't explain. But she says she's with Tantor, so Tantor must be in some kind of contact, spiritual, telepathic, psychic. Anyway, he must be aware and there must be some link. The boid's his sex-mate, and if there's a link it's with her."

"So?"

"So we gotta bring him back if he can come, or get some sign of where he is if he can't. There's one way should get him. Torture."

Ngula looked thoughtfully at the inquisitor, noting with distaste the atavistic desire to inflict pain, the blood-shot eyes, due, he noticed for the first time, as much to a latent bestiality as to myopia.

"Torture," he said coldly, "Was outlawed 4000 years ago. It has, I hope and trust, never since been applied, either in the Question or elsewhere."

"Sure, sure," Vordunga spread his thick jointed hands. "We dropped the torture because we had better means for Question. But this ain't torture for Question, this is torture to bring back Tantor and there ain't no other way."

With an effort Ngula concentrated his faculties on the Rationale. To feel distaste, dislike of Vordunga, contempt, were emotional traits to be at once sublimated. The Rationale demanded—Is this true or false?—Has it a chance of success?—Are there other means? There were none.

"What had you in mind?" he asked at length.

"Leave it to me, boss," Vordunga licked his lips. "I'll think of something."

"Very well!" Ngula turned and pressed the egress button. "I shall be in Room 211. Inform me at once if you establish contact."

"Imperialist!" he muttered in a rare resort to profanity. Once in room 211, Ngula paced up and down, strangely disturbed. The thought processes associated with the sound patterns of the music game seemed to link with a dislike of Vordunga, distaste for brutality, irrational admiration for Dadulina and something else—a brief, fleeting hypnogogue—a piece of fibre—colour—a pattern of—what was the word?—beauty. Strangely disturbed, he snapped up the intercom to Room 208. A sharp whistling sound like swans in flight—a scream, abrupt, strangled, dying away in the diminuendo of distance.

"Dadulina!" He cried, hoarsely. But had it been Dadulina who had screamed? In ten seconds he was through the aperture and into Room 208. Dadulina sat, inscrutable as ever in the inquisitorial chair. Across her naked back thin red weals were forming and on the floor beside lay a fly-whisk. Vordunga's symbol of office. Of Vordunga there was no sign.

Nervously, hastily, with trembling fingers he unstrapped her wrists, removed the skull cap and electrocardiograph attachment. Silently he handed her her robe, belt and sandals. Dadulina smiled for the first time as she draped the thin, warm fibre-glass around her and fastened the buckle. Ngula was non-plussed. A smile—a pre-Rationale smile, a facial contortion in which only the Trash now occasionally indulged.

"Vordunga?" he asked. She spread her hands, signifying incomprehension. The door had been locked, the apertures in place. Only the code word could activate the shutter mechanism and the daily code was known only to himself and Vordunga.

"Boid," he said, "we gotta talk!" She nodded slightly.

"Dadulina," he cried, "You gotta help me!"

"I'll help you—all I can."

"Come!" he said. He escorted her from room 208 and back to the aluminium pad at Dulwich. He did not

speaking again until, sitting in the room where the embroidery hung on the concave wall, he sat and watched Dadulina draw coffee from the mural dispenser.

"I'm sure sorry," he said. Dadulina looked at him with inscrutable eyes that slowly warmed and brightened like the pre-dawn tinge of earth's air when the orbital craft skims out of the blackness of universal night.

"You're a good man," she said. "I hadn't expected that."

Good? What was good? A man of rank, of standing, a Chief Scientific Investigator was efficient, just, exact, exacting. Goodness was for the small Trash. And yet he was pleased she thought him good, though inhibiting at once the sense of pleasure as an irrationality, a weakness, a Trash-trait. He took the Marijuana cheroot she offered, snapped open his lighter and proffered the first light, a gesture of equality, intellect to intellect.

"Tell me about Tantor," he said. She was silent for a while, drawing thoughtfully on the cheroot.

"What do you know of Joik?" she said at last.

"Who knows anything about Joik?" he asked. "No one but Tantor. We know how to achieve it, acting on the Tantor formula. But what is it? I doubt if Tantor knew himself, he certainly never explained it to anyone if he did. How could he, or anyone, know or understand how a relatively small amount of energy under the right conditions will joik a craft a matter of light years in a moment or two? Only Tantor could have devised the formula—but what it is? No one knows."

"I know." She said. She said it so casually, so unemotionally, he thought at first it signified only knowledge of his predicament. When he realised that the implication was a knowledge of the fundamentals of Joik, his incredulity conjured up the question:

"You smoke many of these?" But no, her eyes were clear, pupils normal, her hand steady. She was a smoker not an addict. He thought of the acres of computer that had delayed for weeks the solution to Tantor mathematics, the miles of formulae that had emerged to need re-solution. And only Tantor knew to what the host of symbols had referred. She knew? Well, she was Tantor's

sex mate, on the Tantor plane. Had intersensory transference ever previously achieved this degree of mutuality?

"Tell me about Joik," he said. She pressed a button in the storage area and from the emergent drawer took out a light coiled spring about ten centimetres long.

"Take it," she said "and bend it so that the two ends meet." He did so.

"That," she said, "Is the universe."

"How come?"

"As you look out toward a star, many light years away, you are in fact looking round a series of coils, since light travels, not in straight lines, but in spirals. The light from the star, say it is here"—she indicated the sixth coil of the spring—"reaches you by travelling round these six loops. Your space-craft follows the same course, since your predictions of its position are based on optical observation. By the activation of Joik, you travel in a true straight line, through the loops,—so." The simplicity of the explanation to a problem that had baffled the greatest physicists of the age, confounded him.

"You sure of this?" He asked.

"Sure?—I discovered it. I have put it to test."

"But—Tantor?"

"I am Tantor. Tantor and I are one."

He remembered the 'Quasi normal' veridity rating. She believed, not with absolute certainty, that she had somehow merged with Tantor.

"How did you become Tantor?" he asked.

"I did not become. I always was. The real I was one with the real I of Tantor."

"This appears to be metaphysics," he said. "It may be scientific like philosophy in a theosophical sense but as such it is outside my terms of reference. Can you tell me where the Tantor we both knew is right now?"

"He does not exist."

"You mean he ain't?—He's dead?"

"I can't explain," she said, "if you won't accept philosophy as a science, because this is where metaphysics become physics. Only metaphysics is real and physics ain't." He still held the coiled spring with the two ends meeting.

"Tell me what happened on the last Joik," he asked.

"Tantor—I—we—miscalculated the impetus factor and the craft stopped between the coils—say about here." She indicated between the third and fourth coil.

"Then he is still there. He exists."

"You don't understand. He is outside the coils."

"Sure—all right. What is outside the coils?"

"That is the metaphysical part," she said slowly. "Outside the coils is reality." What was reality? Reality was, by any definition, what one saw and felt and touched. What could be outside the coils that could be described as any more real than inside? Void, most likely. Space. Real enough if one liked to think so, but less real than a solid.

"You'd better tell me," he said "what reality is and why if Tantor's there and he's real, why we can't get at him."

She looked at him with a sort of maternal sufferance, like a mother explaining the mechanics of the solar system to an infant.

"Outside the coils is the real Tantor and the real me—the real All, in fact."

"You mean everyone has a real counterpart?"

"There is only one person," she said slowly. "Outside the coils is the Person."

"You mean—like God?"

"I suppose you could call him that as well as anything else. Tantor always called him the Dreamer."

"Why?"

"Because here, inside the coils, are the figments of his imagination, the splinters of his personality broken loose in dreams—that is you and me and Vordunga and the two-headed dwarf and everything we think real."

Ngula's rational mind pondered the hypothesis—since it could be no more than that. Dadulina could not know what was outside the coils—if coils there were. Nor could Tantor have known before the Joik. The mechanics of Joik were a proven fact but its significance was a matter for speculation. True, if the universe were a spiral there would arise the question of what was outside the loops and at the ends. He looked at the bent spring.

So that was the theory. The ends met. If you went far enough around the coils you returned to the starting point. Good—a circular continuum in spirals. What was then outside and inside the curve? All that had been established with any degree of certainty was that Tantor was between the loops. And—Vordunga?

“Where is Vordunga?” he asked sharply.

“He doesn’t exist any more.”

“You mean he ain’t?—How come?”

“Tantor is now one with the Dreamer, but since he still dreams he is a separate fragment of his dream personality.

“He is thus both aware of our dream world and is one with the Dreamer. Vordunga attacked me, which was a nightmare to Tantor, who thus ceased to dream of him. No one can exist if the Dreamer ceases to dream.”

Absurd? Yes. To a Rational, a Scientist—puerile. But where was Tantor? Where was Vordunga? Tantor appeared at least to have the power to modify the normal sequence of cause and effect. Vordunga had proved his point, if crudely. The key was Dadulina, remote, inscrutable, immeasurably desirable; Dadulina. The key need not, he thought, be brashly turned by cruelty. Deliberately he rose and took her in his arms—a scientific experiment, a tug at the emotional bond that linked Dadulina with her man, a tapping of the extra-terrestrial aqueducts. Rational.

To his surprise she responded warmly, undoing the cleft of her belt and enfolding him tenderly in soft brown arms. Even allowing for the effect of the narcotic, he was amazed at his desire for her and the quick sublimation of his Rationale to the erotic. He tried to remember to be on his guard against any manifestation of the presence of Tantor, any pre-cognition of ceasing-to-be; but life-long discipline was powerless against the thick velvet lips of Dadulina, Tantor’s boid, the splintered fragment of the Dreamer’s personality.

Then it was over and Dadulina was dispensing banana wine from the plastic pipe siphoning from the storage vaults, aloof and inscrutable as ever.

“I thought,” he said lamely, “the Dreamer might stop

dreaming of me just now."

"Why?" she asked.

"Thought Tantor might not like it."

"Tantor is real—sex is real—like beauty—music."

"And narcotics?" he asked as she lit another cheroot.

"Narcotics," she said slowly, "are the only real thing in a world of dreams. They bring us nearer to the Dreamer. Beauty, music are the gateways to reality but reality is hard for us dream-symbols to fathom." He looked at her thoughtfully but accepted a second cheroot.

"Tell me about beauty," he said, "I only know a boid's beautiful like you, Dadulina." He followed her eyes to where the embroidery was hanging. Suddenly he was on his feet.

"That thing—that—that bit of beauty—it's finished!"

"Yes" she said.

"Now listen," he barked, "if he's back in the real world, how can he make beauty here in this unreality where he ain't?"

"You still don't understand," she smiled.

"You tell me!"

"It's very simple. So like Tantor. He had learned to love beauty, that is why he perfected the Joik, to reach a world that is real and beautiful. Splintered dreams can be selective. He has dreamed his work finished."

"You smoke too much," he muttered. Was this the answer to the age-old quest for the meaning of existence? The eternal clambering up the pyramid of knowledge, leading only to a summit, the awakening of the Dreamer? Was this Rational?—but the colour patterns of the embroidery were complete and where was Tantor?

"If I dream," he said "I see things, people. But they ain't—they don't exist. They ain't entities. They ain't real. But me—I'm real—you, you're real. How come we can be dreams?"

"You ain't the Dreamer," she said. "He dreams you and me because you and me are a part of him."

"But progress! *Jomo!* We have progressed—logical development—how about progress? Dreams ain't logical!"

"Are we?"

"Well, ain't we?" He asked dumbfounded.

"What is progress?" She held up the embroidery. "See this flower? Do you know what it is?" Sure he knew, it was a rose.

"Yes—a rose. Long ago, in the pre-Rationale, the rose was beautiful, it gave you pleasure and pleasure was a desirable sensation, not a Trash-trait—you looked at the rose, inspired. You smelled it and wondered. What do you Rationales know of a rose? You know the frequency of its reflected light, can analyse the particles emitted—you can name them all—but can you smell it? Does it mean a thing to you?"

An hour before, he would have asked "What should it mean?" But now, under the influence of the narcotic, under the spell of Dadulina, he felt a glimmering of comprehension. An awareness of entity for its own sake. Confused, irrational, he bit his nails, nibbling and tearing at the cuticle.

"Amphetamine!" She handed him a tablet. He swallowed it, feeling the luxurious sense of well-being return, coupled with a lucidity of thought impossible without the aid of the drug.

"Unfinished," he said, looking at the embroidery. "Unfinished but finished." He rose and activated the library replay, halting the scanner at the beginning of Schubert's 8th Symphony.

"Listen, boid!" he said. He had noted exactly the sound pattern and the form of the music game, had noted that the pattern and form was, as the title suggested, unfinished. Puffing his cheroot, his faculties alert and perceptive, he listened. The pattern passed through the second movement into a third and finally a fourth, reaching at the end an inevitable climactic cadence. Schubert's 8th Symphony was finished.

"Yup," he said, "your theory ain't quite substantiated, but it holds water.

"I can substantiate it."

"How?" He asked. She looped a brown arm round his neck. He felt an urgent Trash-trait. A desire to requite sex with service, a desire to please. With an effort he

concentrated on the Rationale. "Substantiate!" he said.

"Give me a space craft. Pre-set the locators to the Tantor formula and I will return to the Dreamer." Pupils distended under the narcotic influence, he considered the proposition. Spacecraft were not playthings for Curators. But the search for truth, ultimate truth, was a pre-eminent criterion in all decisions.

"Vordunga didn't need a space-craft," he said at last.

"Vordunga did not become one with the Dreamer. He ceased to be."

"It could be done," he reflected, "I should need to come with you. At least we should reach somewhere and we should—" he hesitated at the Trash-wish "we should be together, Dadulina."

"Nope," she shook her head. "If you come, you will not know. No one would know and it is your duty to seek truth and to know. If I go alone you will be left with the knowledge of ultimate reality and a glimmering of new values. It will not help you in the end, nor the rest of the world, because, ultimately, the Dreamer will awake. But in the intermediate stage it may inspire a quest for the real values, the sounds, scents and visions of the Dreamer's world. You will all be happier when you know that the quest for knowledge is futile and that nothing ultimately matters in a world that is fundamentally unreal."

There were obstacles, but Ngula's rank and prestige overcame them. It was, he said, necessary to the task of locating Tantor, the pioneer of Joik. It necessitated also a parting with Dadulina, but where the choice lay between a boid and the quest for truth, Rationality necessarily predominated. Within a week the craft was resting between the galleys pointing toward the constellation of Ursa Major, its controls pre-set to the Tantor formula. Dadulina, imperturbable, regal Dadulina lay on the anti-grav couch awaiting count-down. The stars along the spiral loops of space beckoned, twinkling in cosmic irony at man's latest probe into the belly of reality. The Dreamer yawned. Ngula, his mind purged of all distracting thoughts but the Rationale, fixed his eyes to the screen, the take-off galleys, the passenger behaviour

graphs. Steadily and audibly in his headphones the heart beats of Dadulina measured, the moments to the count down. 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1—blast off!

Hovering for a moment on caryatids of fire the craft nosed forward, gathering momentum and then, gravitation and inertia conquered, streaked forward into the unknown, soon to become only a pupil in the iris of the sky contracting to a pin-point of light moving among the stars. Ngula followed its course on the radar screens, noted its acceleration creeping toward the speed and distance factors where Joik should operate. Dadulina's heart beats throbbed steadily after the initial acceleration turbulence was over.

7000, 8000, 9000 m.p.h.—approaching 10,000, the distance factor diminishing—10,000 m.p.h.—the two needles corresponding, the activator circuit light glowed, joik circuit closed:—Joik! The pin-point of light in the night sky, the blob on radar screen vanished and the heart beats ceased abruptly.

“Scan!” he shouted. The radar beams accelerated on the joik principle leaped the coils and scanned a universe 10 years before its light would reach the earth. Void. Particles, meteorites, stars, planets, gaseous clouds. No craft—no Dadulina.

Ngula watched the screens hopelessly. Dadulina had joiked, had gone as Tantor had gone, into the unknown. And for what? There was no proof of the spiral, the coils or the Dreamer. Proof only of non-existence. Hours passed, he withdrew his concentration from the scanners only momentarily to light a cheroot, the last gift from Dadulina. As the smoke curled the diaphragms of his headphones vibrated to a sound. The music of the spheres. Schubert. But now no longer an oscillographic image—a reality—a—what was the word?—A beauty. And then, clearly and audibly, visually exact, the telepathic image of Dadulina on the screen and the words. “Thank you, Ngula!” The hypnogogue faded and the music ceased.

Thank you. The pre-Rationale formula, the primitive attempt to requite service by utterance. He was pleased she had thanked him. He felt pleasure without physical stimulus, emotional pleasure. He was no longer a

Rationale, not even a Trash element. He was a primitive, an archaism, a savage, desiring only to be one with the Dreamer, with Dadulina, in a world of music between the loops.

It was then that they came and took him away.

The Bwana rubbed his stubbled chin ruminatively, eyeing the assistant inquisitor thoughtfully and with some scepticism.

"So that," he said, "Is the story of Ngula?"

"As he recounted it under question. Veridity exact."

"You have analysed the cheroots of course?" Vordunga bowed.

"A compound of morphia, hallucinogenic, non-habit forming. Non-toxic, but, in my opinion far outside the permitted range of Marijuana compounds, also, I submit, highly subversive." The Bwana sighed. Another problem for the narcotics division. A new narcotic. Legalise it, like Marijuana and lose another Chief Scientific Investigator to a cosmic hallucination or proscribe it and start a highly profitable Black Trade. Ethics should have been included in the rational sciences.

"Trace the source and impound all stocks."

"It will be done."

"We should perhaps pay our Curators more for their legitimate function. That wretched dope-pedlar got clean away, I take it?" The Bwana's tone held a mild reproof.

"The narcotic confused the machine, Bwana—the first boid to beat the machine. I knew it. But we will find her, Bwana, and we will find Tantor."

"Find her?—The Joik I believe was set to ten light years."

"Ten light years, Bwana."

"If you begin scanning now, the trace will reach you in twenty years, since radar particles travel at the speed of light. You will then have trace ten years in time-lag. The habitable planets in that area are unknown, but no doubt number many thousands. I think, Vordunga, that only the hallucinogen that led Ngula to believe he could trace after Joik will lead you to suppose that either Dadu-
or Tantor will ever be traced. We must write them off as

renegades."

"Can we extend Joik to radar, Bwana?" The Bwana yawned.

"Without Tantor, we can extend Joik to nothing. We do not know what Joik is. Only . . ."

"Yes, Bwana?"

"Nothing," said the Bwana briskly, "Nothing at all." He watched the hunched back of Vordunga disappear through the aperture. The shutters had closed before he picked up the paper on which were Bwana doodles. His doodles, indicators to the subliminal and possibly also to a conjectured universal subliminal, pointed often to a solution of much that was otherwise insoluble.

On the paper he had pencilled carefully and symmetrically a spiral, bent so that the ends were meeting.

"Nonsense, of course," mused the Bwana, pencilling, even in his reverie, a pyramid and a face between the loops.

We shall soon know, he thought contemplatively, his faculties again alert. The eyes in the sleeping face were already half open. Nothing disturbs a Dreamer quite so much as Joik.

—ERNEST HILL.

ONE OF THOSE DAYS

by Charles Platt

The noise of the traffic below grated on his nerves. Yet he couldn't close the window and shut it out; when he did that, the heat became intolerable in the room. He cursed the malfunctioning air conditioner; his wife, who delightedly soaked up the sun and couldn't appreciate his suffering; and then, for good measure, he cursed the world in general. Outside in the street below, a truck roared by; as it passed his window, churning up great clouds of dust, its load bounced and clattered, the noise, yet another irritation, hammering into his throbbing head.

He ran a finger round the back of his collar. It was revoltingly sticky. His hands were sweating. He was sweating all over. His shirt lay damp, clammy and repulsive on his back. His watch strap stuck to his wrist. His eyes ached and were tired in their sockets. He sighed, and sat down heavily in one of the modern, uncomfortable arm chairs his wife had chosen for the room. Sunlight was streaming through the big picture window and on to the carpet, the glare leaving painful after-images on the inside of his eyes when he closed them.

He realised it had been a mistake to sit down in the chair, for the cushions prevented air from reaching his back, and without ventilation he only sweated more. Yet it was too much of an effort to stand up again, too much of an effort, too much . . . He was horribly aware of his pig-like slimy sweat. He cursed his body and the weather and felt utterly miserable.

Another lorry passed the window, followed by several cars, hooting and revving their engines. He winced and closed his eyes.

"Darling?" The nagging, nerve-grating voice drifted down from upstairs. He ignored it.

"Where are you, dear?" The effort entailed in working his jaw muscles and tensing his vocal chords into speech was too great. All she had to do was look for him, to find him. There was no need for him to reply.

"Where *are* you, George?" The door of his room opened; he heard the maddening squeak of its hinges, then the thump-thump of stiletto heels on the carpet. "George, why didn't you *answer* me?"

What could he say? That it was too much effort? That it was unnecessary? That he couldn't be bothered?

"Hot," he mumbled. Her voice was vague when she replied.

"Yes, isn't it heavenly?" she said. He opened his eyes and looked at his wife. The bikini. She ought to know better. It looked incongruous: her face, neck, arms and legs tanned a pale brown, the rest, shielded from the sun by her everyday clothes, left a milky white. But she wouldn't take any notice of what he said, wouldn't use an artificial tanning lotion. God, how it irritated him. He let his eyelids slowly close.

"George?" That nagging voice again. What did it want now? "George! Are you listening to me?" Why couldn't it leave him alone? Now it had asked him a question. It was waiting for an answer.

"Yes dear. Yes, I'm listening."

"Then why have you shut your eyes? George, is there something *wrong* with you?"

He sighed. "No, there's nothing wrong." She didn't seem to hear, started fussing round the room, doing all the things he hated most. Adjusting the cushions and straightening the curtains, wiping her finger over the polished surfaces, looking for dust. She opened the venetian blind, over the window facing him, that he had previously closed to cool the room. Sunlight flooded over him. She turned round.

"Did you answer me, George?"

"Yes, I said no, there's nothing . . ." But why pretend? "Hell, there damn well is something wrong with me. I feel terrible."

"Do you, George?" More fussing round the room. Every action calculated to inflict the maximum irritation.

"Do you want me to get Doctor Fletcher round?" He imagined Fletcher mumbling over him, taking his temperature, listening with his clammy stethoscope and probing with his hard, icy fingers, examining his sweaty body; and then prescribing some useless pills, because he had to do *something* to justify his fee.

"No, don't bother," he muttered.

"What was that, dear?"

"I said, no, don't bother? I don't want to see that old fool!" When he spoke loudly, it made his temples throb; the blood all seemed to pour into his skull. Did She know that? Was that why She pretended not to hear?

"There's no need to shout, George. If you're going to mumble at me, I can't be expected to hear you, now can I? Please don't be unreasonable, dear. If you don't want to see Doctor Fletcher, there's nothing I can do for you, is there?"

"No, Maureen, I'm afraid that there's nothing you can do for me."

He waited, but there was no reply. Another truck roared past, banging and clattering. There must be a bump in the road out there, he decided, that made them all clatter at that spot. A bump in the road, just outside his window.

Several more cars passed. Their exhaust fumes rose in the shimmering heat and drifted into the open window. He felt them stinging his nostrils, and his head started throbbing even more. This was intolerable. And still his wife said nothing. Why didn't she speak? Had she gone out of the room? Had she actually left him alone? Cautiously, he opened his tired eyes.

Her face was a foot away from his. "Peekaboo," she said, and giggled inanely. He smelt her cheap perfume, saw the badly applied makeup, the smeared lipstick, the pores of her skin black with ingrained dirt. Why did she have to be like this?

"Oh, God," he muttered, and turned his head away.

"George, what is wrong with you?" She pouted at him resentfully. "You're really not being very nice to me this afternoon." She stood up and started patting her

dishevelled hair in place. "If you were at all considerate, you'd take us down to the river this afternoon. You know the children would love it."

He hated the water, she knew that. Was that why she had suggested it? The river, filled with countless motor boats hired by greasy youths with portable radios, with roaring speedboats, with luxury cruisers polluting the air with their diesel fumes. The flies and the wasps, and the ants that crawled on you and bit you, and then retreated into the grass that stained your clothes indelibly green. All that, and the ever present noxious stink of river weeds.

"No!" he said, half shouting. "I'm not going. This time, I'm not. You can go. You enjoy it, don't you? You take the kids, Maureen. You enjoy yourself. Leave me here. Don't worry about me, I'll be all right here."

"What's come over you, George? I can't understand it . . ."

"I'm sick, can't you see? I'm sick and ill and I feel like I'm half dead."

There was an uncomfortable pause.

"Sometimes, George," she said, "you are just impossible." Thump-thump of heels walking to the door. Squeak as it opened. "How you can be so self-centred and inconsiderate, I just don't know." The door slammed. Like a slowly melting jelly, George sank further into the chair.

The door opened again, and three noisy pairs of feet pounded towards him. Three shrill voices screamed at him.

"*Why* aren't you taking us to the river, Daddy? *Whyyyyyyyy* daddy, *whyyyyy*?" He clenched his fists. He would remain calm, he would fight them.

"Please don't bother me now, children."

"But, daddeeeee . . . *whyyyyyy*?" He stood up shakily. His whole body throbbed and ached. His vision clouded with thousands of tiny glittering specks and he had to lean against the wall.

"Out, go on, get out!" he shouted. "I'm not taking you to the river. I'm not going, do you hear? Do you understand? Ask your mother. She's going to take you. Just leave me alone, leave me alone and . . . and get out!"

Three small innocent faces stared up at him. The children backed slowly towards the door, then turned and fled, slamming it. The thunder of their feet receded into the throbbing, muggy distance.

The heat! It was intolerable. How could he feel so terrible and still live? He must fix that venetian blind, close the slats again and keep the heat out. He stumbled over to it. Something seemed to be wrong with his eyes. He pulled on the cord of the blind. It was jammed, his wife must have jammed it somehow. He pulled harder, but it still wouldn't budge. Annoyed, he tugged still harder; one end of the metal case came away at the top, with a shower of plaster dust, and the blind flapped madly, its metal slats chattering at him. Enraged, he tugged at it again; this time, the whole unit came away and the metal case fell, striking him painfully on the side of the head.

Raw heat poured into the room. The sun seemed to be hovering just outside the window. He staggered back, groping behind him for his chair, blinded and stunned. He tripped and fell back into it, wrenching his ankle. A small, tufty lump of a cushion rammed him in the back, pressing his soaked, slimy shirt into contact with his boiling wet skin. He moaned. The chair felt as if it were swaying. It was swaying. It was tilting. He felt sudden nausea and lashed out one arm to try and keep his balance. His hand hit an ornamental flower vase and sent it crashing to the floor in a shower of fractured glass. His action also upset the modern, unstable chair; it teetered on two legs, and then overturned, tipping him on to the floor. His arm twisted under it, and he felt something wrench.

Flat on his stomach under the chair, he pawed blindly at the carpet. Things were swirling about him. He squirmed and struggled frantically, thrust one arm hard down on the floor in an effort to lift himself up. His hand came down on the jagged edges of the broken flower vase; he felt the pain and then the blood gushing from his wrist. The heat wafted over him in great suffocating, engulfing waves, the noise of the traffic outside an endless grating rumble that slowly increased in volume. Coloured sparks shot through his vision. He felt trapped, paralyzed in a web of boiling hot, gooey treacle.

He crawled painfully, dragging his wrenched ankle and wounded arm. The door was a mile away and receded even as he approached it; then suddenly it was a white cliff towering over him into darkness that hovered round the edges of his eyes. He squinted and could just make out the door handle high above. He gulped for air, gasped, and stretched up towards the handle, blood pouring down his arm and sticking his shirt to his skin. He grasped the handle, and started to pull himself up; but then the fragile, ornate porcelain handle broke and gave way under the strain, and he fell back on to the floor, sobbing.

He had lost a lot of blood, he knew that. But there was nothing he could do. He called out for help, but his throat was too dry to make a noise, and anyway no one would take any notice. He had to move. He couldn't move. It was too *hot*. The traffic was roaring and smashing and clattering around him, and he was choking on the fumes. He was moving down, into the centre of the vortex, falling backwards. Darkness wafted in, shot with a tracery of luminous white veins. Slowly the darkness thickened, the heat closed in. He twitched a little, then his head fell limp on the floor, and he just lay there.

A little while later, his wife came bustling into the room. When she opened the door, it hit his head where he lay on the floor with enough force to fracture his skull; but by that time he was already quite dead.

Charles Platt



Science Fantasy

✻ ✻

This Is

SCIENCE FANTASY

✻ ✻

a bi-monthly collection for the connoisseur

This issue contains Part II
of "The Blue Monkeys"

by Thomas Burnett Swann
and other new stories

by

Harry Harrison

John Rackham

Keith Roberts

✻ ✻